Connecting Credentials

BUILDING LEARNING-BASED CREDENTIALING SYSTEMS

Developing a common language to serve as a basis for a connected credentialing system

Work Group Report
June 2016

Background

Connecting Credentials is a collaborative effort of more than 100 national organizations and more than 2,000 stakeholders to make degrees, certificates, industry certifications, badges and other credentials easier to understand, use and interconnect. Postsecondary credentials (degrees, certificates, industry certifications, and more) are the currency through which skills and knowledge are recognized -- connecting people to jobs, education programs and career pathways.

Connecting Credentials aims at creating a more interconnected credentialing ecosystem — one that is student-centered and learning-based. Such a system is needed for several reasons: to ensure educational quality; increase access; align industry, education and issuers of credentials; multiply the benefits of increased attainment; reduce social inequity; and foster individual progress that results in market-valued credentials.

Participants at the National Credentialing Summit convened by Lumina Foundation in October 2015 identified five priority areas of focus needing more in-depth work. In January 2016, the Connecting Credentials team convened work groups focused on those five topics, charged with developing recommended actions. The work groups, which involved more than 100 leaders from across the country, included:

- **Developing common language** to serve as the basis for a connected credentialing system;

- **Using real-time data and technology** to empower credential users and create continuous feedback mechanisms;

- **Creating nimble end-to-end quality assurance processes** to support portability and trust of credentials;

- **Advancing scalable employer engagement approaches** to improve demand signals and increase relevancy and currency of credentials; and

- **Creating flexible credentialing pathways** leading to family-sustaining jobs to increase equity.

This report and those of the other four work groups can be found at www.connectingcredentials.org. An action plan integrating the work of all five groups will be released in summer 2016.

Introduction

With common language recognized as a key component to the success of many of the aims across all of the Work Groups, the members of the Common Language Work Group had their work cut out for them. Addressing pressing concerns about how a common language would benefit the various stakeholders was paramount.

Issues

For years the term credential was synonymous with academic degrees, licenses, and certifications. However, as new forms of credentials like badges, certificates, and nanodegrees have entered the marketplace, they have begun altering the credentialing landscape. This onrush of new credentials is causing a mounting predicament for a variety of stakeholders, including issuers, earners, and consumers. Definitions that used to seem rock-solid are no longer so. Terminology that previously clearly imputed value and meaning is splintering under the added weight of new credentials and their related stakeholder audience requirements. Language understood and valued in one industry comes across as gibberish in another. What do we mean when we use the term degree? What is an open badge? How do either of them relate to a certificate? Information that should be shared easily within and across different contexts feels increasingly incomprehensible and unworkable.

We find ourselves amidst a surfeit of variously used but little understood terms that threaten to destabilize the perceived value of established credentials like degrees. This instability imperils the still nascent potential of new credentials like open badges. We're already seeing industry responding negatively to devalued perceptions of the traditional four-year degree. The different but related audiences of credential issuers, earners, and consumers need a common language that accommodates the entire credentialing system.

With these issues in mind the Common Language Work Group got to work.

Vision

Given the importance of credentials in a world of increasing complex educational and workforce requirements, a common language is no longer just a luxury but an absolute necessity. Deceptively simple at first glance, our aims for the development of a common language revealed themselves to be more complex as we progressed. They included:

- Exploring the possibilities for the construction of a common language to help build a strong and replicable connected credentials ecosystem.

- Promoting the use of competency as an initial dimension of common language.

While we find formal education beginning to trend toward competency based education, there are disputes about whether or not everything can be considered a competency. Consequently, the Common Language Work Group noted that competency is a good beginning point; however, it may not be the final ending point.

Audiences

The desire for a common language unites an impressive number of stakeholders. They range from individual learners to employers, from academia to industry certifying organizations, from licensing bodies to emerging credential issuers. Conversations with our colleagues in other working groups underscored for us how varied language can be, particularly as it's used and spoken across a variety of contexts. In short, right now there appears to be no one general audience.

Assumptions

It was apparent from our first call that the assembled work group team represented a wide variety of stakeholders, including people who not only possessed experience in this area, but some of whom had previously endeavored to accomplish if not the same task, then one very similar. With this group, we could focus on uncovering existing issues and sidestepping others. Together we stood the best chance of

accurately representing and understanding the issues, opportunities, and challenges of developing a common language.

As noted, excellent work had already been accomplished by other initiatives investigating and defining key terms and our team sought to make the most of it, choosing to build upon this work rather than start from zero. Standing on the shoulders of giants made the most sense for this work.

With these assumptions in place, we concluded that a core set of definitions would offer opportunities for conversations/debate/feedback and provide impetus for continued work.

Process

The work group strived to ensure that the team could tackle the massive issue of a common language to benefit an ecosystem of connecting credentials during our three scheduled 1.5 hour phone conversations. To that end, we established a dynamically structured working call methodology built around the use of a prepared google doc for synchronous work. With that operational approach in place for each call, our team signed in, took notes, and stated their opinions in real time on the same document. This synchronous approach allowed for deep dives and limited us from straying from our stated goals. The results of this process were extremely successful and publicly appreciated by team members.

By performing a limited audit of existing frameworks, white papers, and associated government and industry documents, we narrowed the possible list of terms to focus on approximately 20 commonly used terms that are central to credentialing. Comparing and contrasting the work that had gone before allowed us to take the best of what had previously been defined and refine it further. In some cases that meant genericizing content, in some cases it meant tightening it up even further. We were lucky enough to have team members who had written the definitions of some of these terms, and we relied heavily on their expertise as well as their previous work. The ACE white paper, Quality Dimensions for Connected Credentials, and the glossary of Lumina's beta Credentials Framework developed by Corporation for a Skilled Workforce proved particularly helpful.

After spending two calls synchronously writing and talking through definitions, we found that our initial set of terms was not inclusive enough and added several more terms to move our total up to 26 definitions. We intentionally limited the number of terms for several reasons: to ensure that we arrived at consensus definitions within our limited timeframe; to recognize that a comprehensive audit was virtually impossible due to limited resources and time; and to ensure that we delivered a foundational set of terms from which to build forward. Additionally, because of the complex issues and multiple audiences that exist in this space, we chose to take a fairly agnostic approach to definitions. How? By defining terminology in simple and relatable ways so that terms could act as structural building blocks that can eventually support a larger, flexible framework, discussed more fully in the recommendations section.

Our final list, provided as an appendix to this report, is a compendium of terms, some of which have long been in play and some of which are new terms entering the credentialing conversation. It surprised us to discover that a canonical definition of the term *degree* was hard to come by, so the team leaned on co-facilitator Dave Longanecker, retiring president of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, to devise one. We're pleased to say that it's included in our list of terms.

Additionally, in the process of defining terms, it became apparent that some terms and their definitions are closely related to others. Those terms can even be said to profoundly inform the understanding of each other. In recognition of the intertwined nature of many of the foundational set of terms, we chose to group them into four major categories:

- competency terms;
- credential terms;
- credential connectivity terms; and
- assessment terms.

Conclusion

Various publics have imagined a world in which a common credentialing language is spoken and valued. In fact, many organizations and individuals have struggled to create that universal language. However, these earlier repeated attempts have proven that a universal canonical language is all but impossible to achieve: the complexities of diversified needs, shifting requirements, and various audiences have proven too onerous to surmount.

We believe that a flexible framework may prove to be the most effective and workable answer to building a common language to benefit a world of connected credentials. A common language framework makes it possible to connect an individual's learning across academia, workforce, civic opportunities, and social connections thereby benefitting the individual as well as all the larger social structure. A structured, accepted foundation can be used to bridge industries, clarify intent, and simplify communication while ensuring that various stakeholders are able to indicate experience, skills, and knowledge in contextualized ways.

We've created an initial glossary of twenty-six terms and their definitions that can act as the beginning of that structured approach.

Throughout this process, our understandings of audience needs, terminology use, and situational inertia have advanced. Some challenges are yet to be addressed and we consider them as potential opportunities in Next Steps.

Next Steps

In order to continue to move towards our goal of a common language that builds and bridges connections, we can't stop here. We must address a variety of areas including planning, sharing, research, audience definition, and testing. And of course, we must continue the collective work of uncovering important credentialing terms in need of canonical definitions, as well as constructing a proposed common language framework for connecting credentials. Specific next steps are detailed below.

Suggested next step: planning

In order for this work to continue, it may be necessary to define it as a separate deliverable, with its own roadmap and funding stream. While common language was noted as essential to all of the subjects undertaken by the five work groups, the conversation was limited due to tight timeframes and limited scheduling opportunities. This can be addressed with a longer timeframe and increased dedicated resources.

- Define a plan / create a roadmap for continued building of the glossary. e.g., funding, resources, team.
- Identify ongoing issues that must be resolved in order to increase common language usage.
- Establish a working timeline for development, testing, and deliverables.
- Ensure a feedback loop that continues to review and refine this work as time progresses

Suggested next step: research

This initial set of terms, or glossary, provides us with the opportunity to do some field-testing. While we've included new terms like badges, we've also included old terms, e.g., degree, that have not been fully interrogated in a long time. By mixing together new terms and old, we get to the ability to reevaluate and challenge long-term understandings.

- Publicly share the glossary version 1 of language definitions: develop action plans for research, testing, feedback, revisions.

Suggested next step: sharing

As a first step our findings and associated deliverable in the form of a glossary should prove useful as an initial foil for public sharing, research, and feedback. This is a great first step, but we need to accomplish more. Let's find the time and resources to do so.

- Continue to use the assembled team as a sounding board.
- Make use of the team's ability to share this work in their respective environments.
- Explore opportunities for Creative Commons copyright in order to further the adoption of the work.

Suggested next step: building

Communication about this work plays a key role in its success and it doesn't stop with the first set of terms. In addition to sharing this work, we should further develop examples and use cases.

- Continue to build the foundational set of terms.
  - Additional suggested terms: *credit*, *transfer, interoperability across contexts*
- Create examples and use cases, refine, research, and test those examples.
- Begin constructing a framework for a common language, one that addresses multiple audiences and yet remains clear and understandable. Use the beta Credentials Framework as a vehicle for building competency-centered shared language.

Suggested next step: audiences

While we have concluded that there is no one general audience, we should investigate that assumption and challenge ourselves to more fully understand who the common language audience might be. Since we're recommending a dynamic and flexible structure, we need to engage a wider audience, The significantly diverse set of stakeholder audiences underscores the need for proper vetting before we arrive at final definitions and a final framework solution.

- Define audiences and benefits for those audiences, e.g., industry, policymakers, academia.
- Develop a process integrating key terminology across stakeholder groups, including foundations and funders: build a user guide.

Additional areas of opportunity

Other areas that would require more intense planning, financial investment and dedicated focus include:

- Developing competency-based communications vehicles that increase transparency among credential issuers, holders, and employers
- Improving the interface of credentials across sectors (military/civilian, industry/academic, etc.)
- Encouraging the development of badges and different forms of credentialing to communicate more clearly about knowledge and skills

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