

Connecting Credentials

BUILDING LEARNING-BASED CREDENTIALING SYSTEMS

**Create Nimble-End-To-End Quality Assurance Processes to Support
Portability and Trust of Credentials**

Work Group Report

June 2016

1. 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 better credentialing system — 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.

At the National Credentialing Summit convened by the Lumina Foundation in October 2015 priority topics to drive toward an improved credentialing system were identified by participants. Following the Summit, the Connecting Credentials team convened five work groups to discuss the problems, working assumptions, gaps and challenges and to develop recommend actions. The work group topics 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
- Creating flexible credentialing pathways leading to family-sustaining jobs to increase equity

A synthesis of the recommended actions across the five work groups will be provided in a single, integrated report to the Lumina Foundation this summer.

2. Workgroup Report

Workgroup 3, focused on the statement, “Create nimble-end-to-end quality assurance processes to support portability and trust of credentials” met during February and March 2016 to develop a shared vision, common language and synergy in the area of nimble quality assurance (QA) processes. After the team identified various aspects of quality assurance and set the work agenda, it used follow-up surveys to expand input from the team members and raise additional issues for discussion. Summation of the survey results provided input for the next discussions. Through this work, the group explored efforts currently underway, identified basic assumptions and key questions that needed further consideration, and recommended actions to advance the work as it relates to the credentialing landscape.

The **scope of the work** presented to the group was to:

- Ensure valid assessment of authentic learning and competencies.
- Adapt quality assurance mechanisms for competency-based education.
- Promote innovation in accreditation.
- Promote licensing reforms to increase mobility/portability.

Through the discussions and survey data, the group developed the following **problem statement** regarding nimble quality assurance processes:

“Quality assurance (QA) is essential to build trustworthiness, reliability, and transferability of credentials. Stakeholders have different perspectives with respect to the language of quality, the value of a QA process, how to conduct a QA process and the resulting outcomes.

The challenge is how to develop common language and equivalent practices that meet the needs of different industries while building trust in the QA process and enabling credentials to be connected.”

Issues identified through the discussions were also examined with respect to **basic assumptions** around the process. These are summarized as:

- Stakeholders have different language, definitions, values, processes and outcomes for quality assurance and this leads to confusion.
- Common language and concepts across the stakeholders would bring greater understanding of the value and transferability of quality assurance processes.
- Any common criteria for quality must be flexible to address needs across stakeholders and context.
- There can be greater equity across quality assurance processes.

The group also formulated key **framing questions** that expounded upon these issues.

1. What activities and innovations already underway are key building blocks that can be leveraged for greater collective impact?
2. What gaps exist between the existing work/innovations and recommended actions?
3. What are the current roles of the various stakeholder groups in regard to QA processes?
4. How might those roles change, particularly in support of innovating new kinds of assessments?
5. What barriers exist that can be removed to make QA processes more accessible to all stakeholders?

6. What federal, state and institutional policy levers could be used to support and promote needed actions?
7. What actions are required to assure or promote equity moving forward?

In addition, the team focused some of its discussion on specific questions that delved into the **terminology and language** of quality assurance:

- How can different types of QA and related accrediting processes be described in more transparent fashion across stakeholder groups?
- How could stakeholder groups be invited to provide feedback on accessibility to/transparency of QA and accreditation?
- How do we use/define “competency” across environments/stakeholder groups and how can QA inform effective application?

The assumption that stakeholders have different language, definitions, values, processes and outcomes was an important discussion to the group’s work. The team began a **Matrix for Higher Education and Industry** to delineate the range of stakeholders:

- credential user (learners/earners)
- credential instructors
- credential issuers (organizations/institution/provider)
- credential evaluators (accreditation/licensing agencies)
- credential policy-makers (local, state and federal government) perspectives.

This work, still in draft form with additional work planned, provides the basis for further work to delve into perspectives that could guide work to develop common language and processes in quality assurance.

Another aspect of the group’s work was a review of the ***Landscape Review of Innovations in the U.S. Credentialing Marketplace: A Working Document***, which is a compilation of different credential-related initiatives created by the Connecting Credentials working team. The nimble quality assurance team examined the 113 different initiatives listed in the landscape document. The team felt that the Landscape Review is a good start to a more comprehensive, integrated repository of resources.

One example of a related initiative included in the repository is the Military Credentialing and Licensing Task Force, which oversees and coordinates Department of Defense (DOD) and Service level initiatives related to credentialing and licensing. National Governors’ Association (NGA) held a Veterans’ Licensing and Certification Policy Academy for states to support efforts to streamline credentialing for military veterans transitioning into the civilian workplace. Groups such as the Multi-State Collaborative on Military Credit, an interstate partnership of 13 states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin), builds on these same efforts to map competencies for transferability. Such initiatives address stakeholders’ perspectives on strategies for developing a common language, crafting quality assurance criteria, and insuring equity in policy and practice.

Another example of a current initiative addressing the themes of common language, assessment, and equity is The Alternative Credit Project™ (ACP), an American Council on Education project funded by Gates Foundation. As one central activity, ACP is enhancing rubrics for assessment of alternative coursework. The project selected high-demand, lower division general education subject areas,

developed agreed-upon quality course and provider criteria, and identified high-quality online education providers across nearly 30 subject areas., providing mandatory and recommended standards for five domains:

1. Online Learner Support & Resources
2. Online Organization & Design
3. Instructional Design & Delivery
4. Student Learning Outcomes, Assessment & Evaluation
5. Teaching with Technology

Initiatives in this arena continue to emerge. EQUIP, (Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships), recently launched through the Department of Education provides opportunities to experiment with access for low-income students to new models of education and training. Collaboration across stakeholder groups—higher education, employers, third party quality assurance entities and other organizations—tests the possibilities of integrating alternative credit pathways with expanded financial aid options while maintaining quality assurance.

Initiatives such as ACP and EQUIP open up new possibilities for quality assurance assessment options as well as challenges. How are these activities coordinated in such a fashion as to be easily accessed and understood by stakeholder groups? How are groups reached out to and invited to provide feedback? How do these experimentations through initiatives impact the role of accrediting bodies/state agencies/licensing groups and interactions across groups?

The team also examined ways in which quality assurance **intersected with the other work groups**. There are many ways that the different group's work is interdependent on each other and have clear intersections that could support innovative work in this area. Key areas of overlap include:

- Common Language: top priority for nimble quality assurance processes
- Real-time data and technology: collecting data on metrics and effective measures of intended outcomes
- Employer engagement approaches: quality assurance processes essential to determine signals and increasing relevancy of credentials
- Flexible credentialing pathways: ways that the learner/earner can understand quality assurance and stack learning to move to family-sustaining jobs

In addition, the group identified that quality assurance processes need to examine issues related to **equity** within the process. The group specifically indicated that any nimble end-to-end quality assurance process needs to avoid “tiers” in the quality assurance process that could negatively impact credential users in terms of education and career mobility and portability.

The team considered eight priorities for future work in the nimble end-to-end quality assurance work and from these, concluded that the following **recommended actions** are the next steps to continue this work:

- Criteria for Quality Assessment
 - Identify components of valid QA process.
 - Develop criteria for quality that are flexible across stakeholders and context.
 - Build the science for creating alternative and flexible assessment methods, with identified steps and related processes.
- Common Language/Common Definitions

- Develop an agreed-upon set of terms and definitions (in concert with the Common Language Workgroup).
- Provide lexicon and glossary for quality assurance processes.
- Effective QA Practices
 - Identify current and best practices.
 - Find the commonality across these practices.
- Stakeholder Outreach
 - Identify and consider various stakeholder perspectives on value of credentials.
 - Use those perspectives to develop outreach and engage stakeholders.
 - Share QA process outcomes for different credentials with stakeholders.

The team recommends to continue focused work in quality assurance within the connecting credentials efforts.

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