Higher Technical Qualifications Knowledge Network: Exploring the Potential of Digital Credentials. June 2024

About the speaker: Yaz El Hakim is a Senior Teaching Fellow at the University of Southampton. In 2019 he co-founded VerifyEd to combine two passions; education and blockchain. VerifyEd is a new platform using blockchain to issue immutable, secure digital degree certificates and micro-credentials. Prior to this, Yaz spent six years working internationally with other educational technology companies including Canvas, Kortext and Aula. He has worked in and with Higher Education for over 20 years, starting as an hourly paid lecturer in Sport Psychology, and later holding the role of Director of Learning and Teaching and Student Engagement at the University of Winchester, UK, where he co-led the national project - TESTA.

Brief notes from the session

In today's dynamic job market, paper certificates and CVs are not only impractical (difficult to share electronically) but are often unable to showcase the dynamic development of skills and competencies. They are also known to be open to fraud, leading to distrust in a system that needs trust built in at its very foundation. Fraud exists across different industries and can have serious consequences, including financial loss and even death.

In contrast, Digital Credentials are data-rich objects that are tamper-proof from issuance and have the power to revolutionize how we validate learning experiences. They can house granular data, provide a comprehensive and dynamic overview of an individual's capabilities, and have the potential to triangulate a range of evidence to accurately and predictably identify if an individual has the skills and competencies needed by an employer.

This is becoming ever more important as industry moves away from one-size-fits all pathways into work and professional development. Apprenticeships are just one example of the ways in which we are now moving beyond a focus on knowledge qualifications, to identify a range of important skills, attributes, behaviours and competencies. These all have the potential to continue to build throughout an individual's working life, offering valuable data points for ongoing micro-credential recognition. Importantly, regular engagement with learning opportunities is now seen to correlate directly with positive work outcomes.

Discussion points

One of the issues that IfATE had raised during HTQ accreditation is the regulatory issue of compensation[1]. They have noted that that compensation does not fit with their expectations – i.e.

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[1] Compensation refers to the mechanism by which a student who fails a module is nevertheless awarded credit for that module on the grounds that the failure is marginal or offset by good performance elsewhere in their programme of study.

students can fail one module and still continue on and pass their qualification. There is an argument that if you could log the KSBs – particularly any that are within a compensated module – that this could offset this concern. This would differentiate HTQs from standard Level 4 and 5 study. Digital credentials could help with this.

We also discussed the LLE and that this approach would offer a logical solution for recording micro-credentials or other small amounts of learning. However, it was noted that the governmental machine is very complex very slow and its unlikely we will be able to influence anything in the short term.

We moved on to discuss the correlation between regular engagement with learning opportunities and positive work outcomes. Sports psychology has shown that previous athletic performance is the biggest predictor of future performance. It also appears that previous learning behaviours and outcomes can also be used to predict future learning. In brief, learning involves repetition, habit and practice. As industry starts to look beyond qualifications, regular evidence of growing KSBs will be the sign of a voracious and curious learner. Digital credentials offer a way to showcase this to future employers.

Finally, we discussed the challenge that some of the creative or practical disciplines can have in showcasing live or large artefacts and portfolios. Yaz talked about the potential to upload an approved portfolio of work to a digital wallet either embedded within an award certificate or as a student-provided link to video, artefacts, sound files etc. (with the caveat this would not be verifiable in the same way as an embedded link).