

Open Badges: a visual, learner-centric approach to recognising achievement

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Open Badges are online indicators of skills learned inside or outside the classroom. In order to understand how badges might be used to support learning and development in higher education, [Ian Glover](#) and [Farzana Latif](#) have been looking into the uptake of these badges. There is a desire for broader mechanisms like badges to help students promote their own unique set of skills, knowledge and experience.



Learning and achievement within Higher Education is typically evidenced with transcripts, degree classifications and certificates, but these formal methods frequently obscure evidence equally important, though less tangible, of learning, such as the development of relevant skills and competencies. Student and graduate employability is high on the agenda for universities, with greater expectation of 'employment-ready' graduates from employers and employment rates and salaries being a major point of comparison between courses on the UK government's [Unistats website](#).

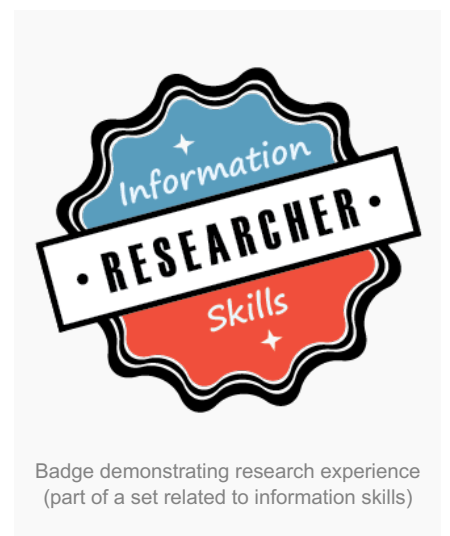


In response to these growing pressures, [some UK universities](#) are taking part in the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) project, which allows graduates to make [additional information](#) about their learning available to employers. However, the HEAR process requires an investment of time and effort from both individual students and the institution and results in a report that is formalised, university controlled and frozen upon graduation. Open Badges may offer an alternative to this approach, with control over the contents of their 'report' being entirely in the student's own hands, an increased emphasis on achievements from outside formal education ('life-wide learning'), and the ability to continue to expand the included information after graduation ('life-long learning').

What are Open Badges?

Open Badges are visual indicators that the recipient has achieved a certain level of knowledge or demonstrated competence in a particular skill. Each badge is composed of an image with additional information invisibly inserted into it, typically the name of the badge, requirements to earn it, links to evidence, the earner's name and email address, and the name of the issuer. Online systems such as [Credly](#), [Badg.us](#), and a growing number of educational tools support the creation, issue and display of badges.

[Open Badges](#) were devised by the Mozilla Foundation, and earners can add their badges to their '[Mozilla backpack](#)' (portfolio), organise them into collections and share them with others. Interested parties can easily access the information embedded within a particular badge and verify that it is genuine and awarded to the stated person. This verification process means that an Open Badge can offer more credibility than, for example, a paper certificate because it can easily be checked for authenticity.



Badge demonstrating research experience (part of a set related to information skills)

Why are they relevant to Higher Education?

In order to understand how badges might be used to support learning and development in Higher Education, we conducted semi-structured interviews with staff members, academic and administrative, from all disciplines at [City](#)

[University London](#). We also held focus groups with Nursing and Engineering students, chosen because of the prominence of skills development in these disciplines.

The reaction from the staff and students was overwhelmingly positive, with both students and staff seeing significant potential in the use of badges as a way for students to stand out from their peers when applying for graduate jobs, placements or further study. The students were particularly interested in using badges to support their professional identity and stated that earning a badge, especially a 'rare' one, would motivate them to put in more effort or do some extra additional work. Staff were generally interested in being able to use badges to track the progress of their students and to encourage students to make use of support programmes, for example, those around information skills such as referencing.

While our investigation suggested that a major use of Open Badges in Higher Education would be in creating a portfolio of achievements that could be used by the individual and shared with their tutors, the most important proposed use was for students to share their portfolios, either in full or in part, with prospective employers. This would replicate the aims of the HEAR, while allowing the students to make use of a wider range of evidence; however, this relies on employers viewing the badges as credible indicators of knowledge and development. A possible method of increasing employer awareness of Open Badges is to involve them in specifying badges and the knowledge and skills that they represent, and perhaps even encourage them to directly issue badges to students. '[Badge the UK](#)' is an initiative intended to raise the profile of badges and increase understanding of the purpose and significance of Open Badges by working with employers and educators to create badge projects.

We have both since moved to other UK universities and have started pilot implementations of Open Badges in our new organisations, including investigations into their use to support staff development activities. Early indications are that the positive view of Open Badges at City University London was not an isolated case – we aim to report our findings from these pilots in due course.

Conclusion

While it is unlikely that Open Badges will replace formal qualifications, it is clear that there is a desire for a mechanism that helps students promote their own unique set of skills, knowledge and experience. This may come through increased participation in the HEAR project, through Open Badges, a combination of these, or perhaps even something completely different. One thing is certain: with employers increasingly expecting graduates to have a demonstrable set of skills and experience, those students who are most able to show verifiable evidence of those skills will be at an advantage. Open Badges provide such an ability.

Additional Resources by the Authors

- [Presentation slides](#)
- Blog posts: [What are Open Badges?](#) and [Using Badges to Recognise Achievement and Increase Learner Motivation](#)
- [Paper reporting on the project](#) at City University London

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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