



The Recognition of “Soft Skills” through the European Open Badges Platform Project

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Abstract

The article is a study based on the European Open Badges Platform (EU-OBP) project, under the Erasmus+ Programme, which is being implemented in seven European countries: Cyprus, France, Germany, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. The project coordinator is EuroEd Foundation, Iasi, Romania. The EU-OBP project aims to assess, develop and promote a common European platform for digital badges, targeted at adult education organizations, adult educators and adult learners. The European open badges platform will enable adult education organizations and adult educators to award digital badges to the public. Adult educators will gain new IT competences and get familiar with innovative tools for the recognition of soft skills and key competencies whereas learners will be awarded badges valid at a European level which will help them with future job seeking or further educational needs. The article outlines the objectives, methodology and outputs of the project and focuses on the main research findings on the use of open badges in Romania and other neighbouring countries.

Keywords: *open badges, adult education, recognition, soft skills.*

1. Introduction

The rapid and profound changes produced by globalization, migration or the unprecedented development of Information and communication technologies (ICT) have affected traditional education. Education no longer happens only in schools. Now there are new ways by which people acquire reliable competences informally or non-formally through their experience and which need to be recognized and validated. It is ICT that may offer practical solutions if wisely used. Open Badges are one of them. Open Badges can ensure the recognition of other ways of learning and the validation of the 21st-century skills, which are not learned at school and are not recognized by university degrees and professional credentials.

A badge is a file in the shape of an icon or medal and consists of metadata about the badge description, a list of criteria to earn the badge, the issuing organization, the issue and expiration date and the web address linked to evidence proving one's skills or achievements. Thus an open Badge (OB) contains verifiable and interoperable digital credentials. A Badge offers evidence-based credentials easily communicated and understood by observers [1]. Employers, educational institutions or associations can access the metadata saved within each digital image and check its validity online. Open badges are available as open standards which any organization can use to create, issue and verify digital badges. They are innovative tools for recognizing acquired soft skills to employers or educators and could be included in the EU-based Europass CV system. There is a wide range of organizations and institutions awarding Open Badges: schools, universities, non-profit organizations, employers and companies, government agencies, libraries, museums, event organizers and science fairs, companies and groups focused on professional development.

2. The EU-OBP Project

The EU-OBP Project and its European Open Badges platform [2] aim at assessing, developing and promoting a common EU platform for digital badges, targeted at adult education organizations, adult educators and adult learners.



2.1 Target groups

The target groups are adult education organizations, adult educators and adult learners, decision-makers in the adult education field, researchers in HR and training, educators' associations, adult education associations and NGO's.

The project meets the needs of adult education organizations and educators by creating an easy to use, motivating digital tool which enables them to identify and file achievements of non-formal, informal and formal learning. The project also meets the needs of adult learners by encouraging them to reflect on their skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning environments and to share their accomplishments with peers and educators.

2.2 The objectives of the project

a) The EU-OBP Project upgrades results from two Erasmus+ projects (iYOT, www.iyot.eu and OBADE, www.open-badges.eu) with the participation of previously included organizations and two new partners.

b) The project's partners will research available projects, platforms or organizations to create the complete EUOBP web platform with 'Reader', 'Toolbox' and 'Guidelines' sections, available as open sources.

c) The project's partners aim to promote Open Badges as a way of recognition of the "soft skills" and the eight key competences in the EU area. At least 500 Open Badges for adult education will be available on the platform by the end of the project. The project will also provide the participating organizations with a series of good practices and tailor-made tools and methodologies corresponding to the current European situation. Moreover, the platform will display a series of tools (reader, toolkit and guidelines) that can facilitate the promotion of open badges and their role in the open education and their social impact so that future employers will take them into consideration.

2.3 The main outputs of the project

The EU-OBP reader is a comprehensive material and tool for professionals involved in the management and organization of lifelong learning development, working in adult education in their local environment. It is based on previous research on digital badges and their availability and usage and gives those interested in issuing badges insights into the process of the real implementation of open badges. The reader discusses opportunities for using badge in adult education and presents some best practices from formal and non-formal adult education. The last section underlines some strategies for the exploitation of open badges in educational organizations across Europe and addresses issues related to policy and practice.

The EU-OBP toolkit comprises a collection of good practice ideas on the implementation of Open Badges in organizations at different levels. Each participating partner collected examples of best practice within the national context and other three neighbouring countries; the research covered 28 EU countries and realized an overview of good practices existing in Europe. The identified practices include organizations that issue open badges in Europe, individual websites with digital badges support and individuals who use the open badges system as part of their curricula or in lifelong learning educational activities.

The EU-OBP web platform is the core of the project's results. It displays all identified open badges implementation practices in Europe and instructions on how to use and implement open badges at diverse organizational, teaching and participatory levels. The Web platform EU-OBP aims to raise European organizations' awareness about the role and impact that open badges can have in our society and to encourage them to look for opportunities for implementation.

EU-OBP guidelines provide its readers with the detailed procedures and activities needed for the implementation of open badges at diverse organizational, teaching and participatory levels. Adult learners benefit from a special section which gives them tips on how to implement open badges in their Europass profile, social networks and LinkedIn page.

3. Main research findings on the use of Open Badges in Romania

The beginning of Open Badges in Romania was rather timid illustrated by a few European projects where participants in their online courses were awarded open badges (PrimeTech project [3], DIGICULTURE project [4] addressing adult learners with low digital skills and low-qualified adults involved in the creative industries sector). In other countries, for instance, Italy, Open Badges seem to have a lot of popularity among students who find online courses extremely useful. In Bulgaria, the



education institutions develop online platforms that offer certified courses, which include interactive presentations and tests for automatic assessment.

Most of the institutions that were identified by the research either using open badges or in the process of implementing them into their Curricula are educational institutions and organizations: schools or universities. They are interested in upgrading their employees'/ students' language or digital skills. They implemented the open badges they had designed for their employees/students according to their needs.

With the unprecedented development of technology when more and more people require fast and effective training, open badges are likely to become reliable indicators of accomplishment or skills acquired online. However, there are no comprehensive studies to look into this new system of evaluation, at least in the countries covered by the research. There is no feedback analysis of beneficiaries either. Moreover, to our knowledge, there is no association of Open Badge holders meant to support their interests in terms of recognition of the credits OBs stand for.

Badges are still at the beginning although they are simply digital versions of paper credentials showing proof of qualification, skills, etc. There are organizations and institutions which find this system poses some risks (in terms of trust mainly) and so do they find the entire digital environment. Findings show a relation between recognition of OBs and the digital environment of the enterprise. Paper-based certificates are perceived as more reliable than their digital versions.

Our society has changed dramatically influencing learning and assessment: OBs align with the changes but challenge the traditional system in terms of reliability and credibility. Findings show that OBs are easily recognized when they support, supplement or add something new to the curriculum, that is when they meet existing needs. Moreover, they are successful when they are designed by the very organization that implements them. OBs that replace existing sections raise questions about their accreditation. Open Badges should meet learners' needs and expectations as learners get them at the end of an online course they choose. OBs will fly when they meet the existing needs of the organization and thus enter the mainstream.

4. Conclusions

The success of Open Badges depends on collaboration, communication and shared views among all stakeholders. We need standardised formats of Obs. The research findings show no standardized forms of open badges. To be recognized and enter mainstream they should comply with certain rules and follow a certain required format.

The criteria for earning an OB should rely on commonly agreed-upon standards. It is also likely that links to credible universities and organisation will add to its value.

The creation of an Open Badge depends on the needs identified by the organization in its context. A successful OB is designed and supported by an interested organization. Thus it is much easier for universities to recognize Open Badges because they create and implement the open badge program for their students helping them to acquire the necessary skills outside classes. They know that getting an Open Badge is based on hard work and study and badge earners are not passive recipients.

Also, the success of OBs depends on their promotion supported by testimonials from stakeholders and OB holders who must find their voice and contribute to their development and recognition. European projects may play a significant role in raising organizations' awareness about the impact the OB implementation may have on education. Open Badges can become an alternative way for learners to get validation for any kind of achievement in formal, informal, and non-formal settings across different stages of their life [5]. This validation makes them interesting and useful for employers, motivating for learners putting effort into meeting their learning goals and encouraging for anyone interested in lifelong learning. The unprecedented development of technology requires that more and more people need fast and effective training. Open Badges can fill a gap in the existing offer of certification and recognition and they are likely to become reliable indicators of accomplishment or skills acquired online [6].

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