Credentials for Open Learning: Scalability and Validity

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this study advocate separating credentialing from the learning process as a path to greater scalability and better measurement of what independent learners learn from OER. They address the challenge of matching/aligning OER offerings with standardized exams as a way for independent learners to access academic credit, and explore ways to achieve consensus among educational institutions about what academic credit means and which types of evidence to accept in terms of learning that occurred outside a particular institution. The study begins with an overview of credit by examination, contrasting the standardized testing approach with the classroom teaching approach to academic credit. The process for creating exams and the accompanying materials that make clear to potential test-takers what the learning objectives, are briefly described. Next, a methodology is developed for building the bridge between OER and the exam. Finally, policy issues around exam acceptance-for-credit are discussed in addition to accepting exams for credit and envisioning a future in which learners can receive transferable credentials in a cost-effective, efficient and valid manner.

Keywords: credentials, open learning, scalability, validity, open educational resources, OER, credit, transfer credit

OER and Academic Credit

The growth of Open Educational Resources (OERs) has sparked an interesting and productive discussion about how OER might be used to expand learners' options for earning academic credit without traditional instruction (see, for example, Conrad and McGreal, 2012; Camilleri and Tannhäuser, 2012). The discussions tend to begin with OER and examine how best to grant credit for learning based on that OER. This paper examines the issue from the other direction: for learners planning to sit for an existing examination for credit, *how can those learners best find OER that covers the material they need to master the subject of the examination?* As a corollary, *how can higher education institutions (HEIs) encourage the validation of independent learning through scalable examinations to take advantage of the scalability of OER?*

What is known in the US as standardized exams (that is, exams produced for use across multiple institutions) have long served as vehicles for academic credit in the U.S. They are scalable, flexibly-scheduled, and cost-effective — but they exist outside of any context of formal classroom instruction and are not tied to a specific HEI, so learners are left to choose their methods of attaining knowledge independently, and may sometimes fail to recognize that their studies have been incomplete. In addition, debate continues in many US HEIs and other organizations that look for a university credential over how and whether to accept particular types of evidence of learning that occurred outside a particular institution. The authors come from the perspective of a US institution that has been at the forefront of prior learning assessment and adult degree completion for more than 40 years. Three main issues are addressed: 1) the concept of what academic credit means, 2) the mechanisms by which OER-based independent learning can fit into a system of large-scale examinations, and 3) the need for a common understanding and standard guidelines for accepting and awarding credit by examination in recognition of independent learning.

The Meaning of Academic Credit

Credit by examination as practiced in the US has grown in a different direction from the assessment practices of the UK and many European countries, where sitting for a comprehensive exam represents a milestone in one's degree program. Two primary approaches to academic credit have bifurcated in the US: one focused on testing detached from specific HEIs, and one focused on teaching, which is predominant on traditional campuses.

The testing approach seeks to make rigorous examinations more scalable and reliable han individually-rated program-specific exams can be. Robust standardized exams are built to measure the desired outcomes (usually in chunks corresponding to what would normally

be expected in a one-semester course), regardless of how the student learned the material. All candidates for a similar qualification sit for the same examination, so that their learning of, for example, a term's worth of calculus can be compared on some objective basis. Although many in the US decry the current (over) use of standardized tests in primary and secondary education, standardized subject tests are rooted in American traditions of accessibility, equality and mass production, and evolved in the mid-nineteenth century as a way to promote equality and fairness in compulsory education (US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1992). US examples of the use of standardized exams in higher education date to the middle of the twentieth century, and include the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), the UExcel and Excelsior College Examinations programs, and the DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST).

All of these exams are designed to be used for academic credit in lieu of participation in a university course, and have undergone review by national agencies similar to, but exclusive from, the regional accrediting bodies that certify colleges and universities, and are widely used for that purpose in the US. Note that these are not the same as exams designed by one institution's faculty for use in determining course placement at that institution; the standardized exams are designed by testing specialists and psychometricians along with subject-matter experts for use at any institution. Hundreds of thousands of students in the US earn at least some of the credit they need for a degree using such exams every year, saving money on tuition fees and earning credit on their own schedule (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010).

The teaching approach relies on ensuring that the academic content is well taught, with path to greater scalability and better measurement of what independent learners learn