# Interview Series on 'Credentialing and OER'

# Interview #3

# Timothy Read





*Timothy Read* is a Senior Lecturer at UNED, the Spanish National Distance Education University. He researches into open learning for languages and for social inclusion, particularly refugees and migrants. He played an important role in establishing OER practice at UNED, and in 2012 was the founding director of UNED Abierta / Open UNED, which remains an important part of UNED's offering (*https://iedra.uned.es/*)

*Dai Griffiths* is a Senior Research at the Research Institute for Innovation & Technology in Education (UNIR iTED), Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR).

**Dai Griffiths.** What certification or credentialing approaches or methodologies for open educational resources are you aware of?

**Timothy Read.** This was exactly what we had to think about when we were getting Open UNED off the off the ground. We wanted to add value to what we as an institution provide, and part of that is our network of regional study centres. UNED has a blended learning model, but the students don't come to us in Madrid, they go to 60 regional study centres around the country. We provided three kinds of certificates in this context. We had course completion credentials, I think you had to spend a certain time watching the videos and completing the activities, and then you got a nice PDF. The next level was an online certificate, that not only documented the modules you had passed, but had a test at the end, albeit a closed test because of scalability. You paid a small amount, and you received a PDF certificate, or "Credential", as it was called, with the title of the course on the front, with information you might want to show to people, and a breakdown of the modules on the back. The third and final option, which provided added value, was a face-to-face (FTF) test. You could book one at a study centre, and do the same kind of test, but with somebody from the centre, and with your identity document on the table. That way there was a certain guarantee, which also had a small cost.

When I started this initiative, it got quite a bit of attention, and I was interviewed by the newspapers. A popular question was "How do I know it's really you doing the course/test? You could turn up for the course, but your smart cousin does the test, and you get the

benefit!". To which I'd answer that, apart from the F2F evaluation, I completely agreed. But these sorts of certificates are only good enough to get you an interview, not to get you a job directly. If the interviewer has any common sense, they'll start asking questions, and in a few minutes, you can tell if that person has actually got the goods!

Talking to friends and colleagues at other universities and seeing their presentations at conferences, we were all essentially trying to solve the same problems, inventing a framework for our certifications and seeing how this could coexist with other kinds of formal training. Even though in 2012 we talked so much about how open education is wonderful for people who have missed the boat and want to come back and do some informal learning etc., the reality was that most people doing the courses were already graduates or people studying degrees who wanted an extra line on their CV. We had to be careful to provide a scalable and robust solution, so we didn't collapse the system. I don't have data for the current platform, but then we had about 200,000 students doing standard teaching, and a similar number in the MOOC platform. So we thought that if we connect these two platforms, we might hit critical mass! We had to figure out how the services offered to the two communities could be compatible, with added value for both groups of people, and to be very careful about the expectations of the people doing the different kinds of courses, with their respective certifications.

This is ancient history because I'm talking about 2015. Since then, some interesting work has been going on. The European Commission has been doing an amazing job with Europass.

In version 2.0 they updated it in the light of their seminal paper that defined what a digital micro-credential is and suggested this as the way for moving forward in Europe. They came up with the underlying e-learning model which and the technical architecture that uses eSeals to issue certificates and so on. This really represents a before and after for the certification of open education, micro-credentials, digital micro-credentials etc. I don't see that you can have meaningful open education resources and practices if you haven't got open certification. So we go back to the pink elephant in the room: who is paying for the certification, since there's no such thing as free.

**Dai Griffiths.** Who do you know who's implemented this kind of approach, and what kind of problems are there with it?

**Timothy Read.** I always see universities as oil tankers, and changing direction takes a long time because of the momentum that's carrying them forward. UNED has made changes, but, at the end of the day, it's a public university with a democratically elected management structure, which typically changes every four years. So priorities come, and priorities go. A lot of the universities I have around me in Madrid, offer these sorts of certificates. But as far as I can see by looking at the academic community and going to conferences, there's still the problem of the cost of certification, and people still like to like to charge for that. I don't criticize the universities, because a lot of education institutions are having difficulty reaching the end of the end of the month. I'd pass my criticism upwards. It's a question for society to decide: what are our key values? If we want an egalitarian, equal rights, open education

system where learning and being able to improve ourselves is a basic human right above and beyond Maslow's hierarchy, then we need our governments to support and fund it. Perhaps, indirectly, I'd also criticize the European Commission in the same way.

There are two ways to accredit and value certifications that students bring into a university. On a degree program you often have free or open credits, which can be any transverse competence that a student wants to include. It could be a course from another university, it could be a summer school. Languages are a very common option as well. You can slot in open education there, and that's reasonably well accepted. For example in UNED we have a web page explaining what is and isn't acceptable and how the students can opt for this process. That's low hanging fruit as far as I'm concerned.

It gets tougher when someone says, "In the in the second year of this of this degree, there's a 70 ECTS course. I'd like to put together these three MOOCS I've got, which have hours and content but don't have credits associated with them, and have them accepted as an equivalent." What happens here? On the degrees in which I work, it'll be decided by the faculty where the course is based, and the teacher of that course makes the final decision. S/he goes through the documents and decides one of three things: no, the external offering is not compatible, yes, it is, in this case, or yes it is for all cases. However, this one by one validation of external studies is not terribly scalable, and the demand for higher education is going up and up. What is needed is a general scalable, robust mechanism to automate this recognition of certification.

**Dai Griffiths.** What approaches, or methods, currently are, or could be, the most effective in providing a service to work-based learning and training as part of professional development?

**Timothy Read.** Any such approach has to be grounded in an institution, a higher education institution, or a training body, which is certified at a governmental or a state level. Somebody there has to give the 'rubber stamp' of quality. In countries like Portugal the government is trying to use digital micro-credentials and open education as a transverse mechanism for certifying everything. We're talking about firemen, policemen, everybody. When you get professional training, from what I hear from my colleagues, you'll be given digitally certified educational objects. As far as possible people are very keen to do this in for open education. The government has delegated this task to the Universidade Aberta, and they're getting training courses going for a whole level of society. The certificates will be issued by them, a prestigious university, under the auspices of the Portuguese Government. So there's a nice clear chain which guarantees quality to any kind of certificates issued

Another way around this is what Europass is doing this with eSeals. If I certify something in the name of a particular institution, then the institution appears as a clickable item, which will then lead through to the public face of this database. It says, yes, there's this institution with this course, this role, and therefore a certain associated guarantee of quality. I think the days of sending people a certificate through the post are over. Whatever certificate you have, whatever aesthetics it

has, it must have some mechanism which guarantees the quality of the of the institutional teachers who are actually issuing it. Otherwise it's of no value.

**Dai Griffiths.** It's interesting, you mentioned the teachers. Is there a possibility of, even if you and I set up an institute, if we're well-known teachers or experts in the field, that we could bypass the whole institutional superstructure and just start issuing?

**Timothy Read.** That's an excellent question. It would be a really cool line to explore, but as far as I know this is not done at the moment. MIT courses very good, and the teachers are intelligent, articulate academics, but there is a bucket full of other teachers who explain things just as well and their institutions are also very good. But people opt for MIT. Why? Because MIT looks more impressive on a curriculum. So, let's imagine, Chomsky gave up talking about politics and went back to doing OERs on linguistics. You could have a certificate by Chomsky on your CV.

**Dai Griffiths.** What are the barriers to credentialing through OER that you've experienced and observed. You've already touched on some of them.

**Timothy Read.** I think there are probably two. The first is the underlying business model, because people haven't figured out a solution to funding open education initiatives, although there are exceptions. They tend to use it as a loss leader, like lowering the price of petrol at the supermarket because when you fill your tank, you pop in for something and end up spending £200 on groceries you didn't really need. People get used to you, your open educational offer, the look and feel of your systems, and there's a certain chance

they might click through from the open courses to the paid ones. I remember there was a debate at the Open University in the UK about whether they would continue their open education initiative because of the costs. They did a quantitative analysis of the click through from open courses to paid courses and realized that open education was more cost effective than paying for half a page advertising in newspapers like the Times Higher Education Supplement. If you're trying to get money out of a stone, then charging people for open education and certification seems a viable option. People will carry on thinking that, until we completely change. I don't criticize institutions for trying. I mean, I've had to justify the budget for these initiatives, I just think we need to push the decision up to people above my pay grade.

The other thing is that a lot of institutions are still convinced that nobody does it like they do. As part of the ERASMUS+ ECCOE project[1], I set up a Model Credit Recognition Agreement (MCRA), and we built a tool. The idea was to reach out to institutions and say, "OK, I've got a Professional English MOOC, it has a certain number of hours and is worth one ECTS. Since you've got the same kind of course, why don't we sign a bilateral agreement?". Believe me, I've I talked to a lot of people at institutions in this position, and apart from one exception, it wasn't possible. Even if the people who are responsible are keen on the idea, it filters up the command chain, and someone gets a panic attack and says "Oh no, we can't do that". I think the solution to that problem is 'friend-of-a-friend' recognition and mutual acceptation. So if for example institution A respects the quality of

the courses offered by institution B, then automatically I accept courses from them. When you move up to large agglomerations of educational organizations, then maybe you see light at the end of the tunnel and a way to get a certification recognition mechanism could be established. There are some funded projects on this now, and organizations like the EADTU have started to look at this for short learning programs. The idea is to move to agreements established above university level, that can provide that kind of validation. Individual politicians and academics may talk the talk, but when you actually sit down and say, "OK, let's sign", they won't do it, for a whole range of reasons. Solutions are needed above university level, because if we wait for the universities to do it, arguably nothing will happen.

**Dai Griffiths.** Can I rewind to paying for the certificate? You've kind of suggested that's a problematic approach, but can you elaborate on that a bit?

**Timothy Read.** No, no, I didn't mean to imply that I think paying for certificates is wrong. I've paid for a lot of certificates. I think we need to explore the conceptual space for other kinds of certifications. So for example, on our Spanish for Immediate Needs MOOCs, certification was initially intended to be paid for. However, upon reflection, it was evident that these courses were all about social inclusion. These courses are specifically targeted to Syrian refugees and other migrants, so we think it's part of the social responsibility of a university to support these people. So that's what we did, by providing them with free certification. Then the next

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question is, "OK, so how can you know that the person who's asking for it for free really falls into that bag, and it's not just someone who'd rather spend the money on other things?" At the time we were collaborating with 20 non-governmental organizations and charities, such as the Red Cross, Caritas, and they were the ones who were able to let us know which students were refugees or migrants.

**Dai Griffiths.** I should have been clearer. It sounded to me that you were saying that the model of 'study for free, then pay for the credential' is not a viable way forward for the sector.

**Timothy Read.** I don't think it's viable for the business model because I don't think you necessarily get enough people coming through to cover the costs of running a learning management system. If we really want to extend this and open it up, then someone, somewhere has to pay for it, in the same way that a public university will get some of its money from the government. If we really want to expand open education and open certification then we should be looking towards the education ministries, local government, and other institutional bodies for funding. Also, I'd be more than happy to put my hand out and ask for money from the large corporate players. I certainly wouldn't want to include or exclude anyone but hypothetically I can imagine that people like Google or Microsoft would be reasonably favourable of doing that.

**Dai Griffiths.** We've kind of covered the next question, but I'll ask it anyway in case you have any further thoughts. What practical

solutions and mitigations to barriers to success have you identified and observed?

**Timothy Read.** I'd like to see some kind of initiative go through the European Parliament, get support of the different member countries, and from there, move up to a general entity that handles this cross institutional recognition. I've mentioned the elements of Europass. I really think they are leading the way, and some of the people who have worked on version 2.0 have told me that you will be able to represent any learning scenario using that system. It needs to be accepted and supported by the European Commission and the European Parliament, but assuming that happens, then you've got an underlying vocabulary you can use for specifying all and every training undertaken anywhere. Once you've got that, you can build your ontologies, add relevant AI, and then you can really start to automatically handle micro-credential and cross institutional recognitions. When you have got recognitions, certifications are just the next level up. So I guess that things are going to move in that way, but I've got no evidence to support that, really.

**Dai Griffiths.** We've already touched on the next question, which is what are the next most important actions that could be taken to enhance the effect of his those of credentialing through OER?". What's should our agenda be?

**Timothy Read.** The European Commission has to be clear on what they actually want. They've always insisted on mobility at European level and transparent education and certification. So they need to give the governments to back the tools to enable them

to make the universities turn this into reality. What we're good at in universities is improving our current offers to try and attract more students. So I'm happy to offer you something, thinking that you're going to use what I've given you to come back and study with me some more. Because, at the end of the day, the devil you know is always better than one you haven't yet met. But I'm not given an incentive to provide certification that someone can take away from our university and easily go somewhere else. That's not necessarily the case because, for example, we do university entrance exams at UNED that students can pass and then use somewhere else. But we could be a lot more imaginative right across the board. It's not reasonable to expect higher education institutions to take that step on their own because they'll think they're shooting themselves in the foot. It's got to come from a higher level, and I don't think the national governments have the international perspective. They're obviously concerned with what's going on in their own country, and every so often they are changing. It requires clear leadership from an international perspective. We need the frameworks, the certificates, and the tools, which we're beginning to see with Europass, and the ELM (European Learning Model). Then they can begin to say, "We expect European Member countries to adopt and apply open education and credentialing in the following ways, with a certain percentage of students having their credentials validated in other institutions". Once the institutions have clear leadership, they'll know what they have to do.

Then the people at the bottom line, the teachers and the students, need to see the added value. As a teacher myself, you've got an infinite number of things you're supposed to have done by yesterday. So new courses and new certifications is something which you're not really sure you should be spending your time on. You need some kind of incentive from the institution saying, "Look, this is the sort of thing that has to be done". Most of the students I talk to, and my children, are aware of the possibilities. My daughter has just finished her architecture studies this year. She's got a few weeks before she decides that she's officially on holidays. So what does she do? She signs up for a MOOC from MIT, because it will look good on her CV and provide some relevant training.

What I haven't mentioned so far is the stackability of digital micro-credentials, moving towards maybe micromasters or different kind of courses. If you're considering at-risk groups, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, possibly refugees and migrants, their focus is on survival. They have to meet Maslow's hierarchy. They can't just take two or three years off and swan off to university. They need something they can do mostly for free, build up, for example, a stack of these digital micro-credentials, which they can then put together and call it a nanodegree or micromasters or something of that kind. This raises the whole question of protection of data and security. A lot of people I've spoken to from Syria are on the wanted list. They're not going to participate in open online courses where they appear on the list of students. People were going on about using blockchain to protect access to your certificates, and Europass is seen as a similar mechanism. You decide who you share it with. But I'm not convinced that's very secure, because the

irony is if you go to your Europass you get a message saying "Be careful of the information you type on our website". As far as I can see, there's very little funding for blockchain, and it makes me wonder if it's because the Commission want to spin out their home baked solution, which is probably what Europass is intended to be.

One of the problems of Europass is the insistence on eSeals. Spain already has digital certificates ([www.fnmt.es/ceres](www.fnmt.es/ceres)) which we use for signing our university listings of students who have passed. We use them for a whole lot of things right through from that to just connecting to the Social Security or seeing how many parking fines we've got. But I can't use this to sign a Europass certificate! It's unreasonable to expect us to have half a dozen different digital certificates to be able to sign different things. In the medium term we'll have to see arrangements where different kinds of certificates can be used to sign these things.

**Dai Griffiths.** The last question, again, we've touched upon, is whether bringing together credentialing and certification and OER can contribute to the sustainability of OER in the long term.

**Timothy Read.** Oh, OER will be there for a long time to come, but I don't know exactly the role they'll have. Being an academic is a vocation and most people are not there because they want to get rich. We all tend to produce content and share it with anybody who is interested. I've got lots of colleagues who are doing amazing work publishing open books and freely available material. It's very easy to put your content on the web somewhere, even if your institution decides they're not

going to publish it. The point is how we can use them as a key part of education. If you've got a 101 course on an introduction to research methods, which presumably every single university in the world teaches to some extent, what sense does it make that everybody is preparing the same materials for this course? It would make a lot more sense if we had one course prepared by people who are interested in it, tuned and refined by the community, that became the de facto course for introduction to research methodology. Then once we have it, we can localize it into other languages.

I think it's perfectly reasonable for people to say, look, I'll give you 6 units of my 10 unit course, but if you want to get access to the rest of it, you have to pay. If you want to certify for it, pay for that as well. But rather than trying to charge you 50€ for my next three units, which I think is outrageous, I like to think about the price of a cup of coffee. I wouldn't think twice about inviting you to a cup of coffee for a chat, so why should I think twice about paying you that money for reading 30 pages of quality content you've written? The long tail effect of people paying small amounts of money can make it scalable. Certification is going to be there; it has to be there. You need some way of guaranteeing the quality. It's like people who insist on going to Google when they get a pain in their leg. On the one hand you'll find that the British Medical Society give you very sensible advice. On the other hand you some complete idiots who tell you to drink petrol or something to get rid of the pain. It's the same, in a way, with educational content, depending on who's done it, where it's put online and the people who are associated with it. That gives it

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credibility, and certification is clearly a key factor.

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