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# Been there, done it, badge it! Information literacy and the use of digital badges at Middlesex University



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## Introduction

The concept of physical badges has been evident for hundreds of years, from military medals to the Scout Association's badges recognising achievement and, more recently, fridge magnets as marks of achievement or as a record of travels. Until 2011, the concept of digital badges was more or less confined to gamification software (Kapp, 2012) but the Mozilla / MacArthur Foundation's (<http://openbadges.org/>) development of a common web-based system for issuing, collecting and displaying digital badges opened up a new way for educators to motivate and engage learners.



## Contextual use of digital badges at Middlesex University

With the continuing emphasis on graduate employability, the use of digital badges to record 'soft skills' inherent in the curriculum but hitherto unacknowledged has been piloted by the Business School at Middlesex University. Best and Parkinson (2015) found that students achieve much more than module learning outcomes, and that a significant amount of this learning corresponds with recognised employability skills. These include communication, research and leadership and are acknowledged by the award of a Group Leader digital badge that can be stored on a virtual 'backpack' and shared with potential employers on e-portfolios and via social media.

Parkinson (2016) commented, of a pilot badge scheme at Middlesex University: 'We have decided to implement the scheme for a further year with a change in the way the badges are promoted in an effort to enhance their visibility and value. Anecdotal evidence from the project pilot would suggest that students with an interest in participating in extra-curricular activities place value on the granular acknowledgement of key skills that badges can offer. However, there is some concern expressed that without the endorsement of recognised external bodies or significant employers the badges may lack sufficient value as standalone certification of employability skills.'



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# Been there, done it, badge it! Information literacy and the use of digital badges at Middlesex University

In May 2015, Middlesex University offered the UK PS programme to learners based in China who were enrolled as Middlesex students with full access to our online library. One of the first considerations was their level of IL, followed by the library support and resources available to them compared with UK PS students, and how this provision could be made more equitable. The Moodle platform is used to provide curriculum resources, so a separate page was developed for 'library skills' (user-friendly term for IL skills!) and included activities based on the physical workshops carried out in the UK. With less reliance on text and extensive use of images, this page used resources already developed, such as links to the PS Library Guide (<http://www.libguides.mdx.ac.uk/psg>), PS blog (<http://mdxenglish.com/>) and embedded interactive quizzes created using iSpring software (<http://www.ispringsolutions.com/>) as well as quiz templates readily available via the Moodle platform ([https://docs.moodle.org/27/en/Building\\_Quiz](https://docs.moodle.org/27/en/Building_Quiz)).

In total, five IL units (the word 'module' was deliberately not used to avoid confusion with the programme curriculum) were created to provide a bridge between studying and using university resources in China and coming to the UK to continue their studies at our Hendon Campus. All units required students to participate actively. On completion they were awarded digital badges that had a specific description of the skill that had been acquired, such as finding a company report and sharing it with other students via the Moodle blog, which had been created for this purpose.

The Library Skills Units (LSUs) were made available to both PS students in China (Renmin and Shenzhen) and in the UK. I was able to demonstrate the units and their corresponding activities to the Programme Leaders in China while they were visiting the UK.



## Outcomes

From the outset I explained to lecturers that the LSUs were designed to be stand-alone IL learning resources in terms of ease of navigation. Because of the different educational backgrounds of international students and their relatively passive approach to learning, the units worked better when they were teacher-led in the classroom, and activities carried out individually and independently by students. There was 100% engagement from students in Shenzhen and disappointingly 0% from the larger cohort in Renmin; 15% in the summer PS programme in the UK when the units were first used and a significant 51% in the autumn / winter (a/w) 2015, UK-only programme. The correlation between confidence in using the Moodle platform, innovative methods of teaching and engagement with the LSUs was very apparent in China, while the greater student engagement in the UK can be accounted for by a relatively larger cohort of students during the summer and the streamlining of the number of badges available, as well as revision of the instructions for each unit in the a/w programme.

End-of-course evaluation produced the following evidence in the UK:

- summer course survey results: 52% found collecting badges very useful; 42% quite useful and 6% not useful
- a/w course survey results: 69% found collecting badges very useful; 30% quite useful and 1% not useful

Anecdotal comments revealed that postgraduate students found the badges less relevant to their studies than did undergraduates; this ties in with the novelty factor associated with gamification in a non-game context (Kim, 2015).

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through Moodle activity reports, and digital badges awarded for completed activities will help to build up more research data with a view to extending their use to other programmes such as the International Foundation Programme at our Dubai Campus. Academics on the PS programme have been highly supportive of the LSUs and the use of digital badges; this has contributed to their success so far: 'From pre-sessional staff and student feedback, it is apparent that the digital badges have offered students an independent method of developing highly valuable skills that are particularly beneficial in supporting students from "pre"-university level studies to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees' (Chatterton, 2016).

Staff development in China and full engagement with the Moodle platform in Renmin should also mean an increase in the number of students in China completing the LSUs and collecting badges.

There is a lot of room for development but 'badges can provide a way to translate all types of learning into a powerful tool for getting jobs, finding communities of practice, demonstrating skills, and seeking out further learning' (Knight & Casilli, 2012). These claims have not been proven (yet), but at Middlesex University educators, including librarians, are experimenting in order to give their students an edge in their studies and success in the job market. For students, digital badges give the opportunity to record visually the attainment of cross-curricular skills such as communication, working in groups and of course IL.

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