

DeTao Masters Academy  
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2015 Workshop Series: Redesigning Higher Education

**Workshop #1:**  
**Education Reform: What role for University-Business-Industry Collaboration?**

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*Could new qualifications and credentials facilitate work integrated learning?*

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Introduction

At the 2012 conference of the European Association for International Education, Allan Pall, then president of the European Students Union, wrote an article entitled “The death of the degree”. He argued that higher learning should focus more on validating students’ learning outcomes so that employers have access to the right mix of skills and competences to match labour market needs. He suggested that traditional degrees no longer fulfill their function.

Three years later, new qualifications and credentials are multiplying. They are part and parcel of the mushrooming of new alternative providers in higher education. These in turn are a response to unprecedented change in higher education prompted primarily by the growing and unmet demand by traditional higher education institutions. As mentioned in our introduction, the main drivers of these changes are social such as soaring youth unemployment; financial stress associated with the growth of tuition fees and student debt; and technological developments like the fast expansion of online learning.

Although we do not believe that the traditional degree is likely to disappear completely, it is certain that new ways of validating learning are appearing. I would like to mention some of the most recent ones, especially in the context of facilitating work-integrated learning.

Open Badges

Let me begin with Open Badges. Inspired no doubt by the boy and girl scouts and their badges, the Open Badges use the metaphor of the “back-pack” into which the learners place badges for different verified skills and competences as they acquire them. The Open Badges, developed by the Mozilla Foundation, have accompanied the Open Education Movement. The badges are digital, can be customized to the needs of the learners and their learning trajectories and contain more information about their knowledge, competences and skills than a traditional transcript of

records. The DeTao Masters Academy is developing its own badges for the DMH courses and intends to offer them at different levels.

### Specializations

Another response to the disconnect between the traditional university degrees and the needs of the labour market are ‘specializations’ developed by Academic Partnerships, a private company based in Texas. Courses – representing the core curriculum in a number of highly demanded and relevant disciplines – prepared by some of the most prestigious universities around the world (provider institutions) are offered online to host universities that include them in their programmes. The successful completion of such courses leads to a new Global Specializations Credential that is part of the traditional university degree issued by the home institution. The Specialization Diploma can be earned in approximately 100 days, and is made up of several Specialization Certificates that can be completed in four to six weeks. The special value of a Specialization is the relevance of the courses to the labour market, the shorter time required to earn the diploma and the quality that is associated with the provider institution.

### Micro and macrodegrees

To respond to the many criticisms of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), especially that they do not offer credits or credentials to the learner, the biggest MOOCs platforms in the US are competing to develop different credentialing models. Udacity promotes “nano-degrees” as credentials built and recognized by industry leaders to advance careers. Coursera recently announced a new arrangement with Google, Instagram and other tech firms to offer what some call “microdegrees”. It’s not just MOOCs like Coursera that have chosen this route.

New entrants like College for America, which now offers Bachelor’s degrees are also teaming up with major employers such as Anthem Blue Cross, Gulf Oil, and McDonalds to offer customized degrees.

### McDonald’s University - UK

These are not entirely new phenomena. Not long ago we used to joke about Hamburger University, the McDonalds’ training centre that has campuses in seven countries. These have prepared generations of McDonalds’ managers since 1977 and now offer accredited degrees.

Margaret Thatcher shocked the other UK universities when she gave it her seal of approval with a visit in 1989. But today, in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University, McDonalds is training dozens of staff in a custom-designed foundation degree in managing business operations, building on already recognised courses. This is yet another example of many links being developed between business and education.

### FutureLearn

Let me give another recent example from the UK. The leading MOOC provider FutureLearn, proud to have recently reached 1 million student enrolments, offers “Statements of Attainment”. Learners pay to take an exam to qualify for this statement and receive increasingly popular

university-branded printed certificates. There was a meeting between the leaders of FutureLearn and DeTao here in Shanghai just last week.

### South Korea's Academic Credit Bank

A different model of accumulating credits from various sources comes from Asia. It could possibly serve as a facilitator for work-integrated learning. South Korea's Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) is an original example of an institution that grants degrees by combining credits from different sources. Although students prefer more prestigious qualifications from traditional universities, credits earned through national certificates or recognized private certificates can contribute to earning a degree from ACBS.

### Competency-based education

Competency-based education is not a new phenomenon. In the US it goes back to the mid-90s when the Western Governor's University began to offer online courses with flexible academic calendars so that you can start a course every month. In particular it certifies competences that seem to be valued by employers.

A more recent experiment is the online, competency-based certificate in business software. It was part of phase one of an experiment by a handful of Washington State's 34 community and technical colleges. The next phase, which began in January, is the creation of a fully online, competency-based associate degree in business.

### A MUST to avoid!

In this era of new credentialing, let me warn against an old phenomenon that continues to be a threat: degree mills, or online providers of fake diplomas.

A recent example is the MUST University – Misr University for Science and Technology.

As a global network of fraudulent online universities it uses high-pressure sales tactics and phony scholarships to extract money from students who end up with worthless degrees.

The universities in the network, which typically say they are based in the United States, actively encourage students from the Arab world to enroll by offering what appear to be generous scholarships after just a few minutes of exchanging instant messages online. But that financial aid comes with a hook—the students are supposed to pay the rest of the fees immediately.

### Conclusion

Despite this proliferation of new credentials, the question remains to what degree are employers ready to take them seriously or look at them at all? Some analysts predict that the transition will take at least a decade. This is partly because many of the credentials mentioned above are digital. Employers need to become more aware of their existence, develop software for their effective use and adopt new and more receptive mindsets.

Nonetheless, what is common to most examples given in this presentation is that they are a product of close collaboration between higher education, learners and corporate bodies, which may well prove analysts' predictions to be wrong.

We hope that China may be a pioneer in this respect and that DeTao with its partner higher education institutions such as SIVA and Tongji University could provide an example for future developments in the use of new credentials to facilitate University-Business collaboration.