

From Conversation to Action: Building Pathways Through the Messy Middle

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Recognition systems around the world are at an inflection point. Frameworks, standards, and technologies for micro credentials, digital credentials, and recognition of prior learning are gaining maturity and existing at scale. Yet a coherent and consistent experience from learners, educators, employers, and policymakers is not easily apparent with, fragmentation, and uneven outcomes contributing to confusion.

In this presentation, authors discussed this misalignment--what many practitioners and participants describe as the messy middle: the space between intention and impact. The messy middle was introduced not as a failure state, but the necessary space between legacy systems, and future possibilities, where innovation, governance, lived experience, and institutional constraints collide. It is where new ideas are tested, resisted, adapted, and reshaped. Progress here is rarely linear, consistency morphs and certainty is often elusive.

The work presented arose from a clinic designed to work within that messy middle rather than to bypass it. Instead of proposing another framework or technology solution, participants were invited into a structured conversation that surfaced tensions, shared lived experiences, and explored what enables movement from insight to action. This clinic was anchored in five key themes, each framed with a provocation:

- 1) Trust as Infrastructure: Governing by Memory, Not Repetition
Provocation: How do we build trust infrastructure for recognition systems, so they are portable, meaningful, and equitable---and stewarded collectively, governed by memory rather than repetition?
- 2) Inclusive Knowledge Systems: Expanding What Counts
Provocation: How do we make room for recognition of knowledge that does not fit neatly within existing frameworks?
- 3) Learner Agency in Legacy Systems
Provocation: What does it take to shift power to learners in systems never designed for their agency?

4) Policy as Enabler

Provocation: How might policy balance guardrails and innovation in recognition systems?

5) Technology for Recognition

Provocation: What role should technology play in enabling meaningful recognition?

The presentation described clinic outputs that were analyzed to provide a synthesis of provocations and reflections. Instead of a definitive roadmap to create coherency, a collection of Pathway Principles were proposed-- practical mindsets and design orientations that can guide action across diverse recognition ecosystems.

This presentation was designed as a call to collaboration for practitioners working in this space in order to connect and collaborate in meaningful ways, demonstrating the power of many in laying pathways through the messy middle.

Keywords: recognition systems, messy middle, digital credentials, inclusive knowledge systems