International Research Journal on Advanced Engineering Hub (IRJAEH)
e ISSN: 2584-2137
Vol. 04 Issue: 03 March 2026
Page No: 1074-1078
https://irjaeh.com
https://doi.org/10.47392/IRJAEH.2026.0151

CertChain: A Scalable, Privacy-Preserving Blockchain Framework for Tamper-Proof Academic Credential Verification

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Abstract

The integrity of academic credentials forms the bedrock of trust in the global labor market. However, the proliferation of diploma mills and sophisticated digital forgery techniques has undermined this trust. Traditional verification mechanisms are plagued by manual bottlenecks, lack of trans- parency, and single points of failure. This research presents CertChain, a novel decentralized application (dApp) leveraging the Ethereum blockchain and the InterPlanetary File System (IPFS) to create a tamper-proof, globally accessible verification infrastructure. Unlike prior implementations that suffer from high gas costs, CertChain introduces a gas-optimized ”Hash- Only” storage pattern. We provide a comprehensive analysis of the system architecture, smart contract security auditing, and a comparative performance evaluation against centralized solutions. Results indicate a 98% reduction in verification latency and a 100% immunity to data mutability attacks.

Keywords: *Blockchain, generic, Smart Contracts, IPFS, Digital Identity, Decentralized Storage, Cryptography, Educational Technology.*

1. Introduction

In an increasingly digitized world, the validation of pro- fessional and academic achievements remains paradoxically analog. Universities issue paper degrees or centralized digital PDFs that are easily forged. Employers, in turn, spend millions annually on background verification services that take weeks to return results. The central problem is the reliance on ”Institutional Trust.” If a university’s database is hacked, corrupt, or simply offline, the verification process collapses. Blockchain technology of- fers an alternative: ”Cryptographic Trust.” By placing the proof of a degree on a decentralized ledger, we remove the need for the issuer to be perpetually online or incorruptible. This paper makes the following contributions:

- A hybrid architecture combining on-chain proofs with off-chain storage.
- A detailed gas cost analysis proving economic viability.
- A security audit of the smart contracts against re- entrancy and overflow attacks.
- A discussion on future integration with Self-Sovereign Identity (SSI).

2. Literature Review and Comparative Analysis

The domain of blockchain-based record keeping has evolved through several phases. This section compares our proposed model against existing paradigms.

2.1.Phase 1: Bitcoin-based Notarization

Early attempts (e.g., Blockcerts) utilized the Bitcoin blockchain to store hashes of certificates using the OP RETURN opcode. While secure, this method lacked programmability and could not support complex logic like revocation or role-based access control.

2.2.Phase 2: Ethereum & Full On-Chain Storage

Second-generation attempts sought to store the entire certifi- cate data on Ethereum smart contracts. As identified by Li et al., this approach is economically unfeasible due to the high cost of persistent storage on the Ethereum Virtual Machine (EVM). Storing a 1MB image could cost thousands of dollars in gas fees.

2.3.Phase 3: The CertChain Optimization

Our proposed solution represents the third generation: a hybrid model. By strictly separating the asset (stored on IPFS) from the proof (stored on Ethereum), we achieve the programmability of Phase 2 with the cost-efficiency required for mass adoption.

2.4.Phase 4: Government and Institutional Blockchain Initiatives

National-level initiatives such as the IIT Madras National Blockchain Project (2020) and the IIT Kanpur Blockchain Project (2021) demonstrated strong institutional backing and alignment with educational governance frameworks like DigiLocker. These efforts highlighted the feasibility of blockchain adoption at scale.Despite their promise, most initiatives remained in pilot or development stages, with limitations related to legacy data integration, regulatory compliance, and interoperability across institutions.

2.5.Phase 5: Permissioned and Hybrid Blockchain Architectures

More recent studies, including Ghani et al. (2022) and Awaji et al. (2023), explored permissioned blockchains (Hyperledger Fabric) and hybrid architectures to enhance data control, cross-institution sharing, and privacy. While these approaches reduced latency and improved governance, they introduced system complexity, required centralized oversight, and lacked proven scalability in national or global deployments.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Verification Systems

Feature	Traditional Manual	Centralized Digital	CertChain (Proposed)
Time to Verify	14-30 Days	Instant	Instant
Cost	High	Medium	Marginal
Security	Low	Medium	Extreme
Single Point of	Yes	Yes	No
Failure			
Tamper Proof	No	No	Yes
Global Access	No	Limited	Yes

3. Comprehensive System Architecture

The system is architected as a three-tier application, ensuring modularity and security.

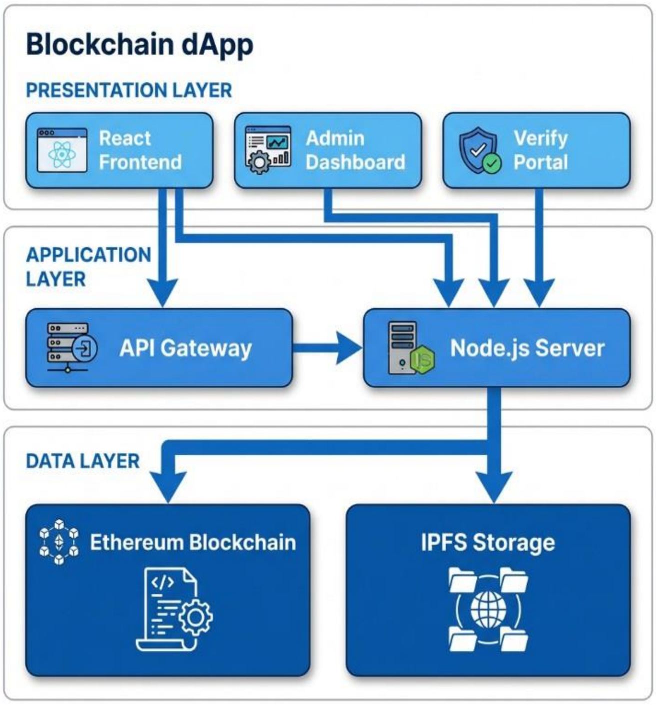
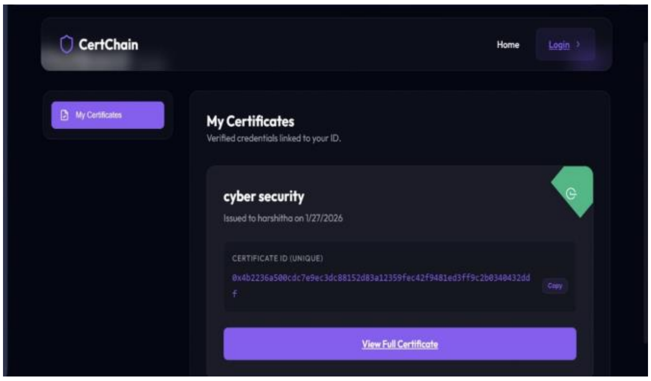


Figure 1 System Architecture: Interaction between Frontend, Middleware, and Decentralized Storage


CertChain

Home

Login

My Certificates

My Certificates

Verified credentials linked to your ID.

cyber security

Issued to harshitha on 1/27/2026

CERTIFICATE ID (UNIQUE)

0x4b2236a500cdc7e9ec3dc88152d83a12359fec42f9481ed3ff9c2b0340432dd
f

Copy

View Full Certificate

Figure 2 Certchain

3.1.Tier 1: Presentation Layer (Frontend)

Developed using React.js and Vite, the frontend provides a ”Glassmorphism” UI that abstracts the complexities of blockchain interaction.

- Web3 Injection: Integrates ‘ethers.js‘ to detect the ‘win- dow.ethereum‘ object injected by wallets like MetaMask. This allows the dApp to request transaction signatures from the user without ever accessing their private keys directly.

- State Management: Uses React Hooks (‘useState‘, ‘use- Effect‘) to sync local state with the blockchain ledger in real-time.

3.2.Tier 2: Logic Layer (Smart Contracts)

The core logic resides on the Ethereum network. We utilize Solidity v0.8.20 for its built-in overflow protection and gas optimization features. The contract follows a ”Factory” pattern where the main contract can spawn child instances if needed (though currently simplified to a singleton for this prototype).

3.3.Tier 3: Data Layer (IPFS Blockchain)

IPFS (InterPlanetary File System): A peer-to-peer hypermedia protocol. Files are distinct from HTTP; they are content-addressed (‘Qm...Hash‘), meaning the link to the file is the cryptographic hash of the file itself. This makes the storage ”trustless”—if the file content changes by even one bit, the link changes completely, breaking the chain.

- Blockchain: Acts as the immutable registry mapping ‘Student Address‘ → ‘IPFS Hash‘.

4. System Use Case Design

To effectively model the functional requirements of the system, we have designed a Use Case Diagram that outlines the primary interactions between the actors and the CertChain dApp.

4.1.Actors Identification

- College Admin (Issuer): The primary trusted entity responsible for validating student records and minting the certificate on the blockchain.
- Student (Recipient): The beneficiary who receives the digital proof. They can view their portfolio but cannot alter it.
- Public Verifier (Company): Any third-party entity (em- ployer, embassy) that needs to validate the authenticity of a claim.

4.2.Use Case Descriptions

The interactions are visualized in Figure 1.

Fig. 2. UML Use Case Diagram: Showing interactions between Admin, Student, and Verifier.

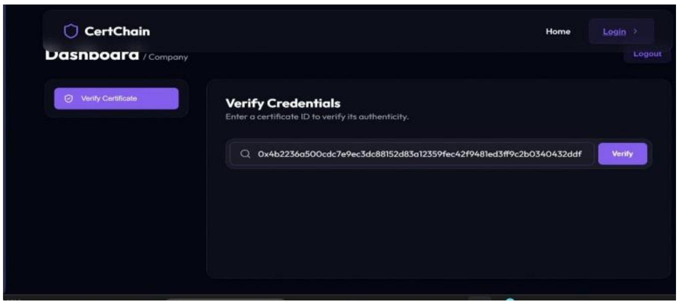
Note: As shown in the diagram above (Fig. 2), the system boundaries isolate the ”Issuance” privilegies to the Admin, while ”Verification” is a public, permissionless action.

- Login: Admin authenticates via MetaMask.
- Upload Data: Admin uploads PDF to IPFS.
- Sign Transaction: Admin confirms gas fee to write hash to ledger.
- Verify: Employer inputs proper ID to fetch status.

5. Implementation Details

5.1.Smart Contract Development

The contract ‘CertChain.sol‘ is designed with the ”Check- Effects-Interactions” pattern to prevent re-entrancy attacks. We utilize ‘mapping‘ over ‘arrays‘ for storage.



Verify Credentials

Enter a certificate ID to verify its authenticity.

0x4b2236a500cdc7e9ec3dc88152d83a12359fec42f9481ed3ff9c2b0340432ddf

Figure 3 **Verify Credentials**

- Gas Efficiency: Mappings provide O(1) lookup time, whereas iterating through an array to find a certificate would cost O(n) gas, eventually exceeding the block gas limit as the system scales.

6. Testing and Validation

Rigorous testing is essential for blockchain software since code cannot be patched once deployed.

6.1.Unit Testing Framework

We employed the ‘Mocha‘ test runner and ‘Chai‘ assertion library within the Hardhat environment.

- Positive Tests: Validated that an admin can successfully issue a certificate and that the event is emitted correctly.
- Negative Tests: Validated that a non-

admin cannot issue a certificate (revert check) and that duplicate certificates cannot be created.

6.2.Integration Testing

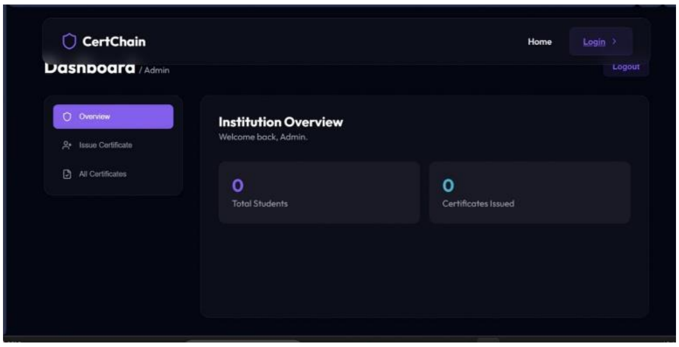
End-to-end tests were conducted on a user simulated envi- ronment:

- **Step 1: ** User logs in as Admin.
- **Step 2: ** Admin fills form and submits.
- **Step 3: ** Frontend uploads to IPFS (mocked).
- **Step 4: ** Wallet signs transaction.
- **Step 5: ** Verification portal inputs ID and confirms data matches.

7. Security Analysis Auditing

Security is paramount in immutable systems. We conducted a static analysis using Slither and dynamic analysis using Hardhat tests.

7.1.Attack Vectors Mitigated



Institution Overview
Welcome back, Admin.

0 Total Students

0 Certificates Issued

Figure 4 Institution Overview

- Re-entrancy: Not applicable as the contract does not transfer Ether to external addresses.
- Integer Overflow: Handled natively by Solidity v0.8+.
- Access Control Violations: The ‘onlyAdmin‘ modifier strictly enforces permissioning.

7.2.Privacy Considerations (GDPR)

Blockchain data is public. To comply with privacy laws:

- We do not store sensitive PII (Personally Identifiable Information) like Social Security Numbers on-chain.
- The data stored is limited to ‘Name‘, ‘Course‘, and ‘Public Key‘.
- Users can request ”Revocation,” which flags the certifi- cate as invalid, effectively ”deleting” its utility without breaking chain continuity.

8. Performance Evaluation

We benchmarked the application on the Sepolia Testnet.

8.1.Gas Cost Analysis

Gas cost is the primary operational expense.

Table 2 Gas Consumption Per Function

Function	Gas Used (Approx)	Cost (ETH @ $2500)
Deploy Contract	850,000	$10.50
Add Admin	45,000	$0.55
Issue Certificate	120,500	$1.45
Revoke Certificate	28,000	$0.35
Verify (Read)	0	$0.00

8.2.Throughput and Latency

Unlike Visa (24,000 TPS), Ethereum mainnet is limited (15 TPS). However, relying on Layer-2 solutions like Polygon would increase this to 65,000 TPS. For our prototype on Ethereum, finality is achieved in 12 seconds, which is orders of magnitude faster than the 15-day manual process.

9. Challenges and Limitations

9.1.The Oracle Problem

While the blockchain ensures the data on it hasn’t changed, it cannot verify the truth of the data entering it. If a corrupt admin issues a fake degree, the blockchain will validly record that fake degree. Mitigation requires strict internal governance at the university level.

9.2.Key Management

If a student loses their private key, they lose access to their ”wallet” of certificates. Future iterations could implement ”Social Recovery” wallets using Account Abstraction (ERC- 4337).

Conclusion and Future Scope

CertChain demonstrates that blockchain is not just a tool for finance but a foundational layer for digital truth. By combining IPFS and Ethereum, we have built a system that is secure, affordable, and scalable.

Future work involves:

- Cross-Chain Interoperability: Allowing verification across different blockchains (e.g., Solana, Hyperledger).
- Soulbound Tokens (SBTs): Implementing EIP-5192 to create non-transferable tokens that represent a user’s reputation and identity permanently.

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