

National Skills Passport consultation

15 February 2024

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Education's consultation on the National Skills Passport.

ATN welcomes the Government's initiative in considering a skills passport – an idea which ATN has consistently championed alongside skills accounts, lifelong learning, and a cohesive post-secondary education system. Improving equity and access must be a principal goal of any skills passport.

The bigger, better educated and more productive workforce envisaged by the Government will start with a more coherent, national and universal post-secondary education system. A more modern, fit-for-purpose and responsive system of skills recognition will be the bedrock on which this is built.

New educational pathways are needed to prepare Australia for long-term challenges such as industrial transformation, regional development, and the changing demographics of the workforce. They must be part of a system that encourages and enables Australians to continue accessing high-quality and relevant education and training through their lives. These measures can support individual aspirations and community development.

Australia's current funding and support systems also make it difficult to mix and match higher education and VET, engage in upskilling and reskilling, manage career transitions and industry disruptions, and provide work-integrated learning opportunities.

ATN welcomes a skills passport as a key building block for a more effective post-secondary education system.

Recommendations

The Skills Passport must be:

- 1. Part of a broader, long-term effort to develop a coherent, national and universal post-secondary education system and achieving equitable access**
- 2. Designed as one of the necessary building blocks for a system of lifelong learning, helping learners navigate their own way through education, work and life and providing quality assured learning and outcomes**
- 3. Equitable and accessible – catering for people of all backgrounds and for existing workers and those returning to study as well as school leavers**
- 4. Easy to use, relevant and connected to existing services to ensure it works for students, employers and educators**
- 5. Developed as a service that works today, but is also adaptable and expandable to ensure it continues expanding access for all students and remains current.**

info@atn.edu.au
www.atn.edu.au

✕ Follow us @ATNunis

Further information

Coherent, national and universal post-secondary education

- Further growth in participation in post-secondary education is unlikely to come from an increase in the flow of school leavers into universities. Given the gains in attainment that have already occurred, a different approach is likely to be required to make further progress in raising attainment and achieving equity.
- Achieving that further progress will likely depend on fostering lifelong learning alongside concerted efforts to ensure the system is delivering Australia's future skill needs and reducing skills shortages. It requires practical steps to be taken to achieve greater integration of the post-secondary education sector and a systems approach which considers how the secondary and tertiary sector work in partnership to achieve attainment targets.
- Further work should be concentrated in two major areas:
 - progressing the recommendations of the AQF Review; and
 - developing the 'building blocks' that are essential for a seamless system, such as skills passports, pathways (including enabling programs), recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials and other short forms of learning.
- Future growth in post-secondary education will partially rely on the robustness and quality of the linkages and pathways between primary, secondary and tertiary education. There should be greater emphasis on:
 - equity and lifelong learning to help meet Australia's skill needs;
 - the development of a system wide approaches to:
 - the respective roles of universities and vocational education/TAFEs in short form courses and industry specific skills development; and
 - the areas in which formalised pathways from vocational education/TAFEs to university are feasible.

Lifelong learning

- Skills Passports can and should, as a component of a system of lifelong learning, help create a fairer and productive economy by:
 - Addressing skills shortages
 - Smoothing local and regional industry transitions
 - Facilitating cooperation across the tertiary sector – universities, TAFEs and other providers
 - Blending work, life and study
- The key features of a lifelong learning system:
 - Affordability – e.g. access initiatives to ensure equity (including enabling pathways), income contingent loans and skills accounts
 - Transferability and portability – e.g. skills passports
 - Sustainability – e.g. mix of government, learner and industry contributions
 - Flexibility – e.g. recognition between providers and sectors
 - Opportunity – e.g. new inclusive ways of teaching and learning.
- Some of the elements needed to progress lifelong learning are only necessary for Skills Passports to be successful:
 - National leadership and governance
 - Ideally a national shared credit point system, or least an agreed model
 - National principles for aligning micro-credentials to agreed and well-understood levels
 - Guidance for mapping and recognising international credentials
 - Open technical standards for interoperability, transparency and authentication
 - Guidance on digital badging and verifiable credentials
 - Lifelong learning accounts for learners for recognition and portability of learning
 - Universal access to quality careers advice for everyone across their life
 - A common language to identify the skills and competences being certified (taking into account international work, and the need for lifelong learners to move between sectors and industries in addition to reinforcing the connections between the vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) systems).

Equitable and accessible

- Equity and accessibility must be at the centre of Australia's post-secondary education system, not an additional, optional component.
- Equity of access is more acute for learners from under-represented backgrounds and there is a real risk that the Skills Passport entrenches disadvantage if it is not paired with support for those that need help but have poor access to guidance and development (especially in schools).
- This also means that the Skills Passport must be valuable and useful to people of all backgrounds, e.g. for existing workers and those returning to study, school leavers and students from under-represented backgrounds.
- Equity practitioners within universities will be invaluable to the development of the Skills Passport. They have research and practical experience of new models of learning (e.g. UTS' U@Uni Academy) that go beyond the traditional models of undergraduate, postgraduate and research education.

Works for students, employers and educators

- The Skills Passport development should include significant input from students. They should be involved early and often to allow this to develop 'from students, by students and for students'.
- Similarly, employers and industry buy-in and adoption is crucial to success of the Skills Passport. There should be an opportunity to have this Skills Passport link in with industry, i.e. a 'link' to graduate programs, career opportunities and scholarships.
- In addition, consultation with employment marketplace and job board providers is essential to ensure ongoing value and articulation between prospective employee, employer via job search engines and brokers.
- Skills Passports should assist all people to undertake post-secondary education pathways that are flexible, relevant and recognisable by employers. They should allow a combination of longer form learning that builds personal and professional identities with shorter form learning that fosters developmental and discrete skills.
- Skills Passports should provide education providers (including universities and TAFEs) a framework for the wider recognition of the knowledge and skills they create and deliver in partnership with industry.
- Australians will need to double the share of learning they do after the age of 21. We need to cater for all learners and new ways of learning.
- Learning models for foundational and continuing education and training need to evolve to ensure that Australia's workforce remains engaged and able to adapt to changing tasks and demands.
- Increasingly, Australians will undertake more training later in life to fill specific skills gaps and emerging skill needs required by business through micro-credentials and other alternative, short-form courses.
- ATN has committed to using its connections with industry to ensure that what we teach and how we teach students keeps up with the day to day on the job demands of industry and small to medium enterprises. This will include short courses, stackable credentials, inclusive learning pathways and stronger industry ties.

Functional, adaptable and expandable

- Both perceived value and cross-sector recognition will be enhanced with a 'single source of truth' approach to this, implying a unified federal rather than state or sector based approach. We would strongly recommend extending existing systems where possible rather than building new ones.
 - My eQuals has been in existence for six years and is now recognised as a trusted and reliable source of data. My eQuals is able to collate microcredentials alongside traditional academic award course credentials, and it has high levels of engagement within the sector, with adoption in universities and TAFE, for example.
 - Any platform used for the Skills Passport must be widely accepted and adopted across the tertiary sector (including TAFEs and other VET providers) and able to record new forms of qualifications and certifications.
- A staged approach to implementation would be desirable, given that some aspects would be easier to implement immediately while others require further consultation. There is a cost-benefit analysis to be applied here, in order to determine an appropriate staging of included content.
- Duplication and crossover with existing initiatives should be carefully considered. This is the third initiative in the last couple of years which appears to be trying to achieve this kind of platform.
- The Skills Passport should be benchmarked and adopt good practices from existing approaches such as the Europass tool set (<https://europa.eu/europass/en>).

Further enquiries should be addressed to:

Executive Director

Australian Technology Network of Universities
info@atn.edu.au