



# A National Skills Passport

Australian Council of Trade Unions response to the Skills  
Passport Discussion Paper.

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## Introduction

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) is the peak trade union body in Australia, with 43 affiliated unions and states and regional trades and labour councils, representing approximately 2 million workers across the country who are engaged across a broad spectrum of industries and occupations in the public and private sectors. As custodians of the skills and training system and the representatives of the workers who undertake the qualifications it offers, unions are keenly interested in the Government's considerations with regard to the development of a national skills passport. The robustness and integrity of any system that workers will use to prove their qualifications are of paramount importance to the union movement and our members. We are not in-principle opposed to the development of a skills passport which has particular design features and safeguards.

In the age of digitisation there are circumstances in which it may be useful for workers to have access to a digital record of their training – much as they may have a digital Medicare card, vaccine record or driver's licence. It is our view that these benefits would be, though real, minor at best.

In designing the passport, we must learn the lessons of the COVIDSafe app – that we should not fall to techno-optimism and assume that, without careful design and implementation planning, the benefits of a technological solution which seem apparent at inception will necessarily be realised. A poorly designed or implemented passport has the potential to not only fail to deliver on the potential benefits of such a system but could also result in a number of significant negative outcomes. Below can be found a short outline of the features which unions believe a skills passport must have, in addition to a number of concerns which we believe should be top-of-mind for Government when designing the passport's features.

Government should carefully consider the risks raised in this submission, alongside the tangible but not revolutionary benefits offered to workers, when making a decision about whether to commit the significant funds the development of a national skills passport would require.

## Union views on a Skills Passport

### Potential benefits of a passport

The implementation of a skills passport has the potential to deliver on a number of tangible benefits to workers. These benefits are real, though arguably few represent game-changers for Australian workers in terms of proving their qualifications. Benefits which a properly designed skills passport may deliver for Australian workers include:

- Time and money saved. Many training providers, universities in particular, have complex processes in place for students (or former students) to obtain certified evidence of their qualifications. In many cases there is a fee charged for physical copies of certificates or academic transcripts. Having a free digital repository of this information available would save workers the time and expense of procuring them through the current means.
- Workers who are relocating, particularly interstate, may have difficulty accessing their previous training providers physically if required to do so in order to obtain certificates or transcripts. This is also true of workers living in remote areas who have undergone distance education (when appropriate for their qualification). A digital skills passport would eliminate these issues.
- Workers who have qualifications spread across the VET and university systems would benefit from these qualifications available in a single repository, rather than requiring them to utilise two different systems or methods of proving their qualifications.

As is clear, the benefits to workers would consist largely of convenience, time saved and, in some cases, a minor reduction in cost. Whether these principles would justify the significant cost and complexity of developing a skills passport, we will leave for Government to determine.

### Design features of a skills passport

It is our view that the above benefits can be achieved through the provision of a skills passport with particular design features. The features listed below represent attributes we believe that the skills passport should have – an examination of the features it should NOT have will follow. A properly designed skills passport would, in our view, provide:

- A link to the worker's Unique Student Identifier (USI) to ensure it captures all their qualifications accurately.
- An option to include high-risk licences issued by WHS regulators.
- Any legislated licences or registrations which are overseen by governing bodies such as an electrician or plumbers' licence or a nursing registration.

- Include the details of only national, accredited training undertaken by the worker at any AQF level, endorsed by the training provider or any other training agreed specifically for inclusion by a tripartite oversight board.

### Potential issues with a skills passport

While a properly designed skills passport may offer a number of benefits to workers, a poorly designed passport may represent a threat to the accredited training system or entirely undermine the value of the passport itself.

For example, the discussion paper canvasses the possibility that the passport might include, in addition to training qualifications, more general 'skills' sections which may or may not include endorsement by employers of these entries. It is our view that this would represent a significant error. Firstly, placing these 'skills' in government-backed skills passport alongside accredited training may be perceived by some as indicating that employer-endorsed skills are commensurate with accredited training. This is not the case. Having skills be endorseable in an unregulated manner by employers, the providence of which prospective employers would have no insight into, risks turning the skills passport into a government-backed LinkedIn account – where all information seems equally open to interpretation or mistrust. It would also place employees at the mercy of employers who would they rely upon to endorse their skills in this government-backed document.

Similar issues are posed by the discussion paper's consideration of the inclusion of work history in the passport. Without clear indications to the contrary this may result in a misperception that work experience is a substitute for an accredited qualification – particularly in industries, such as disability, where efforts are underway to develop a base level of qualification in the workforce. The inclusion of work experience or 'skills' in the passport risk morphing the project into a government-backed quasi-resume – with all the issues raised with these documents given a veneer of legitimacy by association with the Government. The skills passport should be an adjunct to a resume, proof that qualifications claimed are held – not a replacement for it.

We also note that the discussion paper considers the inclusion of industry, employer specific and non-accredited training in the passport. Doing so would undermine skills standards and equate these often-unmonitored training courses with industry-designed and nationally accredited training. This not only undermines the national training system but also may lead to risks to worker and public safety as workers may be thought to be qualified for work for which they have not undertaken adequate training. If there are cases where training other than nationally accredited training needs to be included in the passport, this should be determined on a case-by-case basis by a properly-constituted tripartite panel.

It must also be acknowledged that a digital skills passport may not deliver significant benefits to workers with low digital literacy or those who live in remote areas with limited access to internet

or computers. There is the possibility that these workers, who may not utilise the passport for these reasons, may face hiring discrimination as employers perceive their skills as relatively difficult to verify. Whilst it is agreed there may be mutual benefits to workers and employers in using a digital passport consideration should be given as to how to ensure that a digital passport is not required to obtain employment or prove qualifications as this would likely disadvantage certain groups.

Finally, as the paper acknowledges, the passport may represent a significant privacy issue for some workers. It is our position that workers should remain in control of the information displayed in their passport, including the ability to hide or remove particular courses from view. When providing their passport to employers for skills verification purposes, any visibility an employer has should be single-use. We can think of no justification for ongoing access to an employee's, or prospective employee's passport on the part of an employer. Privacy issues would also be present in any attempt or consideration of outsourcing or privatisation of the hosting or maintenance of the passport – it must not be privatised.

## In summary

Unions are of the view that a skills passport which meets the design parameters laid out above may provide minor benefits to employees in terms of time, cost and effort saved. A passport designed in opposition to these parameters would not only fail to deliver any benefit but would undermine the national skill system. Whether the benefits delivered by the passport would justify these risks, and the costs involved, is a determination for Government. If that decision is made, the union movement stands ready to assist in the design and implementation of the passport. Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the discussion paper.

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