
16 February 2024

Department of Education
GPO Box 9880
Canberra, ACT, 2601

Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
GPO Box 9828
Canberra, ACT, 2601

RE: NATIONAL SKILLS PASSPORT CONSULTATION

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is the national voice and advocate for young people. We represent more than 4.5 million young people across the country. We are the national peak body, and our members include young people, youth-led organisations, and youth sector organisations that support and work with young people.

We welcome the opportunity to provide input into the National Skills Passport consultation.

Reducing barriers to lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is critical to the health of both society and the individual, with recognised benefits including personal satisfaction and wellbeing, empowerment, inclusion, democratic engagement, and development of skills for the job market (Eynon & Malmberg, 2021). AYAC therefore endorses the Australian Government's commitment to building a culture of lifelong learning in Australia.

However, we question the ability of a National Skills Passport to achieve the stated aim of reducing barriers to lifelong learning (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023), particularly if this initiative is delivered solely or predominantly online.

While research suggests that, on the whole, young people are among those likely to benefit most from online learning opportunities in terms of improvement in both personal wellbeing and social and economic capital, this is tempered by the fact that those from lower SES backgrounds, and those with lower levels of educational attainment are more likely to experience barriers to taking up online learning opportunities and are therefore far *less* likely to benefit from them (Eynon & Malmberg, 2021). Rather than reducing barriers to lifelong learning, therefore, an online National Skills Passport may instead reinforce and widen existing inequalities that exist among different groups of young people.

It is also notable that, in line with a lifelong learning approach, almost 90% of young Australians already undertake additional activities to improve their employability. These activities include seeking career advice, participating in work experience relating to their intended career pathways, developing job application skills, gaining formal qualifications,

completing short certificates, and volunteering (Walsh, Gallo Cordoba, Cutler, Huynh, & Deng, 2023).

This evidence would suggest that, without a targeted approach to reach those young people who face additional barriers to engaging in lifelong learning, a National Skills Passport may hold little value in addressing the stubbornly high rate of youth unemployment, which currently sits at twice the national average (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023).

Interestingly, gamification of learning tasks appears to be one promising approach to addressing low levels of learner engagement and motivation (Alsawaier, 2018). The potential to integrate effective gamification elements into any National Skills Passport should therefore be explored, as this approach could hold particular appeal for young people.

Helping people more easily demonstrate their skills to employers

AYAC welcomes any initiative that makes it easier for young people to demonstrate their skills to employers, and appreciates that the National Skills Passport has the potential to enable this.

We know that valuable experiences such as internships, volunteer work, student representation activities, and micro-credentials are often overlooked in traditional recruitment processes (Perkins & Pryor, 2021), putting young people who may not yet have a significant work history at a disadvantage in a competitive job market. Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds also report that education and training they undertook before arriving in Australia is not being recognised by prospective employers (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). AYAC acknowledges that a National Skills Passport has the potential to 'legitimise' these qualifications and experiences, creating a more level playing field for young people trying to secure fairly paid work in their chosen field.

However, experience requirements themselves pose a significant barrier for young people looking to enter the workforce, particularly when looking for their first job (Walsh et al, 2023). Young people are keenly aware of this, and have called for youth-specific employment programs, and greater support during the transition from education to work (Walsh et al, 2023). AYAC supports this position, and calls on the Australian Government to explore avenues to meet these reasonable requests.

Systemic barriers

Critically, young people face significant systemic barriers to both gaining and maintaining safe, secure, meaningful employment. Such obstacles include:

- experiencing underemployment, being treated unfairly in the workplace, or being rejected from jobs on the basis of age, race, gender, and disability discrimination (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023; Ghin & Ainsworth, 2024);
- being engaged in precarious, low-wage roles with unclear career progression opportunities (Walsh et al, 2023);
- susceptibility to exploitation and wage theft (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023);

- being subjected to high rates of workplace sexual harassment (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020); and
- infrastructure challenges in regional and rural areas, including varied access to education and training services, and lack of access to public transport to facilitate travel to work (Hutchinson, Block, Robin, Cheng, Shi, & Zou, 2023).

These issues lie at the heart of youth unemployment/underemployment, and their impact on important factors such as young people’s mental wellbeing and social inclusion, as well as on their economic participation and career progression, should not be underestimated. It is AYAC’s position that action to address these barriers must be given priority. Until this is done, young people – particularly those from marginalised groups – will be unable to reap the full benefits of a National Skills Passport.

Conclusion

While AYAC wholeheartedly supports the Australian Government’s vision of an “inclusive labour market, where everyone has the opportunity for secure, fairly paid work and people, businesses and communities can...thrive” (National Skills Passport Consultation Paper, p.4), we have concerns that the proposed National Skills Passport is yet another example of “responsibilisation of the individual”, which has not had great success in the past (Eynon & Malmberg, 2021). This approach places an undue onus on job-seekers to upskill/reskill and prove their worth to potential employers, rather than maintaining focus on the responsibility of employers and the government itself to address the systemic and structural barriers that stand in the way of safe, secure, meaningful employment for all.

If the government decides to proceed with a National Skills Passport, AYAC would urge, at a minimum:

- Provision of targeted assistance, such as subsidies for internet access and digital devices, to ensure inclusivity and equal opportunity for all users – especially young people living in rural and remote areas, those from low SES backgrounds, and those experiencing financial hardship in the context of the current cost of living crisis.
- Recognition of skills and competencies gained through avenues outside formal education and training, including ‘soft skills’.
- Recognition of education, training, and work experience undertaken outside Australia – crucial for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.
- Recognition of skills and experience that is specific to First Nations communities and their ways of knowing.
- Accessible design – imperative for the inclusion of young people with disabilities.
- Guarantee that access to the National Skills Passport and any lifelong learning opportunities offered through the platform will be provided free of charge, to ensure accessibility for all.
- Commitment to address the systemic barriers that currently infringe on young people’s rights and prevent them from reaching their full potential.

AYAC would welcome the opportunity to provide further input when additional details about the National Skills Passport become available.

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