ENGINEERS
AUSTRALIA

Department of Education
National Skills Passport Consultation
Via email: skillspassport@education.gov.au

RE: National Skills Passport Consultation

Engineers Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the Department of Education (the Department) on the 2024 National Skills Passport consultation. This letter has been developed to assist the Department with its business case for a National Skills Passport by providing comments specific to the engineering profession.

Engineers Australia is the peak body for the engineering profession in Australia, constituted by Royal Charter, to advance the science and practice of engineering for the benefit of the community. We are the collective voice of over 120,000 members. As Australia's signatory to the International Engineering Alliance multi-lateral accords, Engineers Australia maintains national professional standards, benchmarked against international norms. We accredit engineering courses against entry-to-practice competencies to determine whether graduates will meet international benchmarks to practise.

The engineering profession requires lifelong learning and professional development to maintain contemporary knowledge. Initiatives to promote a culture of lifelong learning are supported by Engineers Australia. This is reinforced in both our Australian Universities Accord submission [1] and past involvement on the National Credentials Platform.

Many of the challenges facing Australia require reskilling/upskilling of workers (for example, Australia's transition to a net-zero economy). A secure tool allowing greater ease of verification and sharing of credentials, licences and skills would be of value to the engineering profession with appropriate implementation. To achieve the greatest potential benefit, we recommend the inclusion of:

- Both domestic and accredited internationally awarded qualifications. This is particularly important as skilled migration is essential to maintaining and growing the size of the skilled labour force, particular the engineering profession.
- Recognition of prior learning (RPL), aligned to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).
- Professional credentials, which verify/validate competence, skills and experience.

Engineers Australia's submission provides feedback on the key principles developed by the Department, focusing on how a National Skills Passport would impact the engineering industry. We would welcome the opportunity to continue this discussion further with the Department. To arrange a meeting please contact policy@engineersaustralia.org.au.

Regards,

Jenny Mitchell
General Manager, Policy and Advocacy

[1] Engineers Australia, *Aligning Education With Australia's National Interests*, April 2023, pp6, 8 & 14, https://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/2023-04/Australian-Universities-Accord-%28Cth-April-2023%29.pdf

Engineering House
11 National Circuit, Barton ACT 2600
Phone: +61 2 6270 6555 | Facsimile: +61 2 6273 1488
engineersaustralia.org.au

Valuable, useful and user-centred

Engineers Australia acknowledges the need for a centralised verification platform for skills and qualifications in Australia. The Department's proposed National Skills Passport would offer clear benefits as a streamlined solution to recognise, verify and share useful information only if alleviated of any limitations that could hinder its use by the whole of workforce. We would like to draw the Department's attention to potential limitations which should be addressed to ensure this initiative will be valuable, useful and user-centred as intended:

International qualifications

The engineering profession has continued to face skills challenges over many years as identified in Engineers Australia's *Strengthening the Engineering Workforce in Australia Report.*[2] Overseas-born engineers represent 62 per cent of all practicing engineers in Australia in 2021, up by 33 per cent from 2016[3]. Yet only 50 per cent of qualified engineers born overseas currently working in Australia are working as engineers. An estimated 100,000 qualified, skilled engineers are currently in Australia but are not able to find work as engineers.[4] Engineers Australia has developed the Global Engineering Talent (GET) program offering engineering standards-specific training and paid internships, to help migrant engineers find work commensurate with their skills and experience.

One of the barriers identified by Engineers Australia's research is certification queries by employers including the legitimacy of non-Australian qualifications. [5] Having the skills passport include information on overseas qualifications which meet international benchmarks as assessed by a recognised assessing authority will help overcome this. Therefore, Engineers Australia recommends the National Skills Passport should include information on international qualifications which have been assessed as consistent with international benchmarks. This could be done through incorporating verified outcomes from migration skills assessments by recognised assessing authorities. For engineering, this would ensure alignment with the International Engineering Alliance Washington, Sydney and Dublin Accords.

Engineers Australia can support the consultation by providing a framework for how accredited international qualifications can be incorporated into the platform. These are several options depending on how the platform is developed.

To support this case, Engineers Australia recommends the Government examine migration data to understand the extend of overseas qualified individuals coming into Australia, through the skilled migration stream. It should then be considered how the National Skills Passport would support these individuals.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

The Department should consider the issues identified by TEQSA in relation to how RPL is applied across universities.[6] It is also important that professional bodies, when undertaking RPL, apply a consistent set of standards to ensure all parties have a harmonised view and approach to this to enable it to work within a

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[2] Engineers Australia, *Strengthening the Engineering Workforce in Australia: Solutions to address the skills shortage in the short, medium, and long term*, August 2022, p6, https://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/2022-08/strengthening-engineering-workforce-australia.pdf

[3] Engineers Australia, *The Engineering Profession: A statistical overview, Fifteenth Edition*, November 2023, p9, https://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/engineering-profession-statistical-overview-fifteenth-edition.pdf

[4] Engineers Australia, *Tens of Thousands of Qualified, Skilled Migrant Engineers Missing out on Engineering Work*, Media Release, 14 July 2023, https://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/news-and-media/2023/07/tens-thousands-qualified-skilled-migrant-engineers-missing-out-engineering

[5] Engineers Australia, *Barriers to Employment for Migrant Engineers, Research Report*, October 2021, p23, https://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/barriers-employment-migrant-engineers.pdf

[6] TEQSA, *Guidance note: Credit and recognition of prior learning*, Version 2 2021 https://www.teqsa.gov.au/guides-resources/resources/guidance-notes/guidance-note-credit-and-recognition-prior-learning#:~:text=Recognition%20of%20Prior%20Learning%20(RPL)%20is%20an%20assessment%20of%20an,on%20these%20forms%20of%20learning.

National Skills Passport. Engineers Australia would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with the Department further.

Professional credentials, short courses and micro-credentials.

The utility of the National Skills Passport would also depend on its ability to embrace professional credentials which industry relies on and values. For example, chartered credentials in the engineering and accounting industries are a trusted professional accreditation deeply valued and acknowledged as a professional milestone. Created by industry for industry and recognised internationally, the Chartered credential allows the assessment and recognition of qualifications, skills and experience, providing the necessary quality assurance to employers and communities. The title 'engineer' in Australia is largely unprotected (with the exception of statutory registration schemes), and it is likely to remain this way due to its common use. Engineering practitioners have a high degree of responsibility and liability imposed on them. Professional credentials like the Chartered credential offers an additional layer of verification to elevate engineering skills and ensure public safety in Australia.

To remain Chartered, engineering practitioners must undertake continuing professional development (CPD), an essential part of the learning journey to ensure their skills remain relevant in a fast-evolving industry. Many are upskilling through micro-credential programs offered internally by their employers or externally by training organisations or universities. Engineers Australia, through Engineering Education Australia (EEA), offers many professional development courses, designed with industry for engineers in all stages of the career.

Engineers Australia recommends the inclusion of professional credentials, especially those internationally recognised and valued, but also to capture information on training programs which meet a high standard. This could be done through a program endorsement framework or similar, developed by professional accrediting bodies to provide quality assurance reviews for endorsement of programs that meet appropriate standards. Engineers Australia has developed a framework for engineering courses which meet this criteria and can provide further information on how this can be integrated.

Integrated, interoperable and trusted

The National Skills Passport would enable the collection of a rich dataset with multiple uses and benefits, calling for a level of integration and interoperability options to expand its use and relevance. The platform should aim to streamline data collection and incorporate trusted verification to allow learners, employers, training organisations, universities, unions and professional associations to access and extract data from (where permissions have been given) to streamline and fast-tack processes. The more interoperability and integration the National Skills Passport can provide, the more relevance this platform will have.

Competency mapping and skills frameworks

The National Skills Passport could offer the reliable data needed to allow employers to map their workforce skills and competencies more easily. This would support workforce development and skills management for employers.

Many organisations offer services where they will map businesses and provide skills frameworks to help organisations define capability, set standards and align their workforce to the organisational strategies. This work is often complex and requires a comprehensive understanding of the current workforce, their skills, qualifications and credentials. If individuals were able to provide access to data from the National Skills Passport for legitimate work purposes, this could make the platform have a broader benefit to businesses. This would alleviate the burden placed on individuals while increasing the accuracy of the data collected, helping businesses making more informed decisions, increasing productivity and revenue.

The Department could create an endorsement program, selecting viable and trusted operators to draw data from the platform to allow companies to raise visibility on their talent pool while offering a greater level of transparency to employees on development pathways. More can be discussed with the

Department to define the finer details on what would be required to make the National Skills Passport a more integrated HR solution for businesses.

Mandatory registration schemes

Professional engineers plan, design, construct, test, commission, maintain, operate, and decommission safety critical systems whose performance can have significant consequences for public health and safety, and economic implications for businesses and the community. Most engineers provide their services competently, ethically and with diligence. However, in the absence of regulation for engineering, anyone could purport to be an engineer and provide engineering services without appropriate qualifications, experience, or competencies and with disregard to professional standards and ethical conduct[7].

Engineers Australia supports the co-regulatory model of registration implemented in Queensland and Victoria through Professional Engineer Registration legislation. This enables statutory bodies and professional associations to undertake roles that align with their expertise. The co-regulatory model provides greater assurance of the competency of registered engineering practitioners and reduces the risk of physical and financial harm to consumers. It allows industry and assessment entities, like Engineers Australia, to assess the qualifications and competency of individuals to the agreed national standards required. This then allows governments to implement and maintain a formal register, including prosecution for unregistered work.

The Department's National Skills Passport could contribute to the assessment process by serving as a trusted source of data on both qualifications and CPD. While the platform is a federal initiative, Engineers Australia recommends the inclusion of interoperability between layers of governments, as well as providing relevant access to information for assessment entities.

Privacy and security

Centralising large volumes of personal data will inextricably increase the level of safety concerns. Recent incidents and the rise of cyber-attacks flag the need for such initiatives taken by the Department to be created on a secure-by-design approach. While recommendations were made around the use of the collected data, strong safety protocols need to be set in place to limit the data accessibility by unwanted entities.

Engineers Australia would recommend engaging with cyber expertise to define how the Department could create the most secure yet useful platform, aligning it to the Department of Home Affairs' 2023-2030 Australian Cyber Security Strategy.

[7] Engineers Australia, *The Case for Nationally Consistent Registration of Professional Engineers*, February 2023, p1, https://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/2023-02/GUIDE-case-for-registration.pdf