

INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION

IHE response to the Skills England Skills Passport Survey

April 2026

Question 1. How could a skills passport be useful for employers?

A well-designed skills passport could give employers a clearer, more trusted and more current view of an individual's capabilities, at a time when skills acquisition is increasingly modular, applied and continuous. We support the concept of skills passports because they align closely with educational models that focus on skills, behaviours and portfolios of achievement, rather than qualifications alone. In these models, learning is demonstrated through industry-relevant artefacts, challenge-based projects and team-based problem solving, all of which are directly linked to work readiness.

Currently, employers are often required to interpret and compare a wide range of documentation from different sources, including education providers, training organisations and employer-led internal training. This information is rarely presented in a consistent format and often lacks clarity around the underlying skills profile, methods of competency assessment, validity periods or overall credibility. A skills passport could address this by bringing verified information into a single, standardised format, offering employers greater confidence in both the content and its relevance.

For employers, this would provide something that traditional qualification records often struggle to offer: a clear and consistent way of understanding skills gained across education, professional qualifications, workplace training and continuing professional development. A skills passport would allow employers to see verified evidence of transferable skills, technical capability and applied learning, rather than relying on qualifications alone as proxies for competence.

This is particularly important in sectors such as automotive and motorsport, where there is a wide range of specialist roles and rapidly evolving technologies. In these industries, employers already place significant value on manufacturer-led training, accredited body provision and continuing professional development, because formal further education and higher education qualifications alone do not always demonstrate current competence. A skills passport that brings together qualifications, additional training and CPD - including when training was completed, by whom, and whether it expires - would make it much easier for employers to assess readiness for work and ongoing deployment.

More broadly, the skills landscape continues to evolve rapidly, with new qualifications and frameworks emerging alongside reforms to existing provision. A skills passport could provide a stable, recognised platform to reflect these changes, helping employers to understand equivalences (for example between HNCs, HNDs and HTQs) and to place greater confidence in newer forms of provision.

There is also an important role in supporting labour mobility. As skills policy becomes increasingly devolved, provision may be tailored to regional needs but less easily understood by employers operating in different parts of the country. A national skills passport, designed with portability in mind, would enable individuals to carry a clear and recognised record of their skills across regions, supporting both employers and employees to navigate differences in local systems.

Crucially, skills passports must be driven by genuine employer demand, with employers actively recognising and using them in recruitment and workforce planning. Without this, there is a risk that the passport becomes a compliance exercise rather than a tool that meaningfully supports hiring, progression and workforce development.

Question 2. How could a skills passport support individuals and improve opportunities, for those entering and those already in employment?

For individuals, a skills passport would provide a single, lifelong record of skills, experience and learning, bringing together qualifications, short courses, CPD and evidence of applied work. This would make it significantly easier for individuals to demonstrate competency, experience and ongoing professional development when applying for roles. This is currently done manually, with relevant skills qualifications, training certificates and employer led awards for performance provided on-demand or on-application. The model favours those with verifiable evidence rather than those who obtained skills through employment or through specialist programmes.

IHE Members predominantly deliver skills within an existing qualification, with little recognition that their course is designed with more active skills acquisition and work experience. Those entering from higher education can often struggle to articulate the difference between their course and one with the same or similar title. For example, Norland College offers a full additional suite of practical skills as part of their BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Education and Care. If these skills were more adequately recorded in a skills passport, it would be clear to employers how this course differs from other BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Education, which might focus more on teaching skills for example.

We see particular value in skills passports as an alternative form of entry qualification, both into employment and into further or higher education. A well-designed, standardised passport could be broadly equivalent to (in many cases more informative than) entry routes such as A levels or Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL). It would provide a consistent way of evidencing experience and skills as a valid alternative to traditional qualifications.

There is strong social mobility potential here. Skills passports could help reduce drop-off at key transition points (for example, from school to college, or college to university), which contributes significantly to NEET outcomes. Evidence from skills-focused providers shows that students entering without traditional qualifications can and do succeed at the same level as those who arrive with them. This demonstrates that alternative entry routes such as skills passports do not need to result in lower attainment or success.

For those already in work, skills passports would support lifelong learning by making skills visible, reinforcing the importance of CPD, and enabling individuals to take ownership of their development as technologies, roles and industries evolve.

Question 3. How could a skills passport reflect both local and national skills needs?

For skills passports to be effective, they must combine national consistency with the ability to reflect local and sector-specific skills needs. A nationally standardised framework is essential to ensure trust, portability and understanding across employers, sectors and regions. At the same time, the system must be flexible enough to reflect local labour markets, regional priorities and sector-specific pathways.

This is particularly important where education providers, employers and regional partners are working together to build clear pathways from further education to higher education and into jobs. A skills passport could act as a standardising document that individuals build over time as they move between education and work, making these pathways transparent and easy to navigate.

In engineering and industrial sectors where training ecosystems often involve manufacturers, specialist providers and regional supply chains, local delivery within a national framework will be essential. A skills passport should allow individuals to accumulate recognised learning wherever and however it is undertaken, while retaining national credibility.

In fast-moving sectors such as digital and technology, a challenge will be maintaining a framework that keeps pace with rapidly evolving skills. Any national framework must avoid becoming outdated or overly rigid. A skills passport needs to be adaptable, regularly updated and capable of reflecting emerging skills.

To adequately address both local and national skills needs however, the skills passport must be accompanied or better integrated with national Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) for skills and employment, linking acquired skills with potential next steps and geographic relevance of those roles.

Question 4. How important do you think consistency across different employers, sectors and regions is for skills passports?

Consistency is essential to the success of a skills passport, but it must be designed in a way that reflects the realities of a modern, flexible tertiary education system.

From an employer perspective, a skills passport must provide a trusted, comparable baseline. Without this, it risks replicating the current problem: fragmented information, inconsistent standards, and limited confidence in how skills have been assessed or maintained. Previous attempts have struggled precisely because of this lack of shared infrastructure and interoperability.

However, consistency should not be interpreted as rigid standardisation. The direction of travel in the UK - particularly through the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) - is towards a more flexible, modular and learner-driven system, where individuals build skills over time through different providers, modes and levels of study.

In this context, a skills passport must be designed not around static qualifications, but around dynamic learning journeys across a unified tertiary system, where academic, technical and professional routes are integrated and individuals move in and out of learning throughout their careers.

This has several implications for how consistency should be implemented:

- A nationally consistent core framework is essential, but it should focus on how skills are described, verified and compared, rather than prescribing what learning must look like. This includes:
 - standardised data fields (skill, level, assessment method, awarding/verifying body, currency/expiry)
 - a common approach to expressing level and equivalence across different types of provision (e.g. degrees, HTQs, modular study, employer-led training)
 - clear links to credit, so that skills can be accumulated and recognised over time in line with LLE principles.
- The passport should reflect credit-based, modular learning, enabling employers to understand not just what qualification someone holds, but what they can actually do, based on accumulated and verifiable components of learning. This aligns directly with IHE's long-standing support for credit portability and flexible learner pathways within a tertiary system.
- Consistency must enable navigation across pathways, not constrain them. A core challenge for employers is understanding how different routes relate to one another - academic vs technical, full qualifications vs modules, or newer forms of provision. A skills passport should make these relationships explicit, helping employers interpret equivalence and progression across the system.

- Structured flexibility is required at sector and regional level. The IHE vision of a diverse tertiary system emphasises innovation, employer collaboration and responsiveness to local and industry needs. Skills passports should therefore allow:
 - sector-specific standards and competency frameworks (e.g. in automotive and motorsport, where employer-led and manufacturer-certified training is critical)
 - regional tailoring of provision, while ensuring that skills remain legible and portable across the UK.
- Portability must be a core design principle. As provision becomes more diverse and locally responsive, there is a greater risk that skills become 'locked' within particular systems or regions. A nationally recognised skills passport can mitigate this by ensuring that learning - wherever it takes place - can be understood and valued by employers elsewhere. This is essential to supporting labour mobility and making the most of a more devolved and flexible skills system.
- The system must be designed to evolve. The combination of LLE, modular provision and rapid labour market change means that new forms of learning will continue to emerge. Consistency must be underpinned by governance that allows the framework to be updated, rather than fixed - otherwise it will quickly become outdated and lose employer confidence.

IHE Members' experience in other countries suggests that the most effective systems do not attempt to impose uniformity but instead create trusted comparability across diverse learning experiences. This is particularly important in a UK context where policy is deliberately moving towards a more flexible, lifelong and employer-engaged model of education.

In summary, consistency is fundamental, but this should be understood as consistency of framework, language and trust - not uniformity of provision. A successful skills passport will provide a stable, nationally recognised structure that enables employers to interpret skills clearly, while supporting the flexible, modular and lifelong learning pathways that the LLE and wider tertiary reforms are designed to deliver.

Question 5. What important lessons should be learnt from skills passports (or similar systems) that you currently use or have used in the past?

A key lesson from past initiatives is that skills passports will only work if they are useful, trusted and not overly burdensome. Systems that feel like additional regulation, bureaucracy or data collection exercises are unlikely to gain traction with either providers or employers. Skills passports must therefore:

- work alongside existing records such as transcripts and student records, rather than duplicating them
- avoid becoming statutory requirements unless other regulatory burdens are removed
- remain focused on value and quality, rather than compliance.

Another important lesson is that skills passports must be owned by the individual. If designed in this way, they could help shift the focus away from narrow outcome-based regulation - such as long-term employment metrics that are heavily influenced by economic conditions - and towards a richer understanding of skills, readiness and progression.

Finally, genuine employer buy-in is essential. Employers must see clear value and actively use skills passports, otherwise demand will not flow through the education system.

Question 6. What features should a skills passport have to provide a positive user experience and support interoperability?

A successful skills passport should be digital, user-centred and designed as part of a wider, integrated tertiary education and skills system. It should provide a clear, trusted and portable record of an individual's skills and learning across a lifetime, reflecting the increasing shift towards modular, flexible and employer-engaged provision.

At its core, the passport should address a key challenge for both individuals and employers, which is the current fragmentation of skills information across multiple providers, formats and systems. It should bring this information into a single, standardised and verified record, enabling users to easily understand, present and build on their skills, while giving employers confidence in its credibility and relevance.

To achieve this, several core features are essential:

- A nationally consistent core framework, underpinning interoperability across further education, higher education, employers and sector bodies. This should include:
 - standardised data fields (e.g. skill, level, assessment method, awarding or verifying body, date achieved, and currency/expiry)
 - a common approach to describing and comparing levels and types of learning, enabling employers to interpret equivalence across qualifications, modules and employer-led training.
- Verification and trust as standard, with clear information on who delivered or validated the learning, how it was assessed, and whether it remains current. This is critical to moving beyond qualifications as proxies and towards genuine evidence of competence.
- Support for modular, credit-based and lifelong learning pathways, aligned with LLE. The passport should:
 - capture learning at different levels and intensities, including modules, short courses and CPD
 - where possible, link to credit to support accumulation and progression over time
 - reflect learning journeys across FE, HE and work-based contexts, rather than treating them as separate systems.

- Inclusion of both credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing learning, recognising that a significant proportion of high-value skills - particularly in sectors such as creative industries, built environment and digital - are developed through employer-led training, manufacturer/software developer certification and professional practice. These should be captured in a way that is structured, comparable and verifiable.
- A portfolio-based approach, enabling individuals to evidence applied skills through projects, artefacts and real-world outputs, alongside more formal records. This reflects the increasing importance of applied, work-relevant learning in both education and employment contexts.
- Interoperability by design, allowing the passport to integrate with provider systems, employer platforms and recruitment tools. This requires:
 - open standards and common data structures
 - the ability to share information securely across systems
 - alignment with existing and emerging sector frameworks.
- Portability across sectors and regions, ensuring that skills gained in one context - whether through devolved provision, sector-specific training or alternative providers - can be clearly understood and recognised elsewhere. This is essential to supporting labour mobility within a more diverse and locally responsive skills system.
- A low administrative burden, with much of the data populated automatically through integration with awarding bodies, providers and employers, rather than relying on manual input. This is critical to ensuring adoption and long-term sustainability.

Overall, the passport should function as a trusted, evolving record of skills within a flexible tertiary system, enabling individuals to build and demonstrate capability over time, and allowing employers to interpret and compare skills with confidence. Its design should prioritise clarity, comparability and adaptability - supporting the lifelong, modular learning pathways that underpin current and future skills reform.

Further comments

Overall, IHE strongly supports the development of skills passports. Skills passports align closely with skills-focused educational models, reinforce messages around work readiness, support modular and lifelong learning, and have significant potential to improve social mobility.

At the same time, skills passports should be understood as a supporting tool rather than a primary driver of labour market change. Addressing skills shortages, stimulating provision and ensuring individuals can access high-quality training will remain the most important levers for improving labour market outcomes. A skills passport may help clarify skills, but it cannot substitute for investment in developing them.

If designed with genuine employer buy-in, individual ownership and a clear focus on value rather than regulation, skills passports could become a powerful tool for connecting education, skills and work in a way that benefits learners, providers and employers alike.

Contact IHE

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