Where We're Going

The state of the LER ecosystem going into 2026

Thanks to investments made through SkillsFWD and other parallel initiatives over the past two years, the state of LERs has advanced significantly since 2023. SkillsFWD grantees successfully brought LERs into real-world use, demonstrating how digital records can be issued, shared, and applied across the learning-to-work lifecycle. Learners, employers, and education and training providers increasingly recognized the value of LERs in making skills more visible, verifiable, and portable. Through iterative, user-centered design, grantees identified messaging, interfaces, and engagement strategies that resonate with different audiences, generating concrete proof points for how skills-based hiring and economic mobility can be supported through interoperable systems.

At the same time, creating systems change through novel technology that requires significant shifts in user behavior is a complex undertaking. The experience of the SkillsFWD initiative reinforced that early technical assumptions often require shifts toward deeper infrastructure customization and sustained relationship building. Initial challenges with vendors, system integration, and evolving standards underscored the need for agility and adaptation. Across projects, it became clear that strong alliances, institutional buy-in, and cross-sector trust are critical to drive technological adoption. Widespread use of LERs depends not only on availability of technology, but on clearly articulating tangible benefits to users.

The initiative also highlighted the importance of intermediaries in building trust, establishing shared data practices, and aligning LER implementations with organizational priorities and real-world workflows. Sustained success will depend upon moving beyond tool deployment to embed LERs within broader, human-centered talent systems that reflect how learners, workers, and employers actually navigate education and employment pathways.

As SkillsFWD concludes, the broader LER ecosystem is showing signs of continued momentum and growing visibility. Recent federal actions point to increasing interest in LERs and related talent infrastructure in alignment with broader efforts to strengthen connectivity between education and workforce systems. These actions include targeted investments such as the Connecting Talent to Opportunity Challenge and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) Special Projects, which support state-led work to improve credential transparency, workforce alignment, and talent marketplace infrastructure. These developments coincide with the expansion of Workforce Pell, which has increased attention to clear, verifiable signaling of skills, outcomes, and return on investment. In parallel, non-federal initiatives such as AACRAO's LER Accelerator and Education Design Lab's Learning Mobility Collaborative are building on this growing body of work by advancing shared principles, interoperability, and learner agency across the credentialing continuum.

Entering 2026, the LER ecosystem is stronger, more visible, and more actionable than when SkillsFWD began—but mass adoption remains a work in progress. Many learners and workers have yet to benefit from mobile, interoperable skills records, and scaling these systems will require continued attention to user agency, trust, accessibility, and equitable design. The progress achieved by SkillsFWD grantees provides a foundation for continued learning, coordination, and scaling—ensuring that future efforts keep learners and workers at the center, while unlocking opportunity through more transparent, portable, and trusted representations of skills.