

**The Australian Qualifications Framework: the National Standard for
Qualification Outcomes presented by Ann Doolette, Executive Director AQF
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and skills recognition systems – issues for Asian Economies**

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Presentation précis (to be supported by power point presentation)

The primary purpose of qualifications frameworks is to provide a classification for a country's qualifications according to specified criteria established for the levels of learning achieved. Their other purposes are to ensure qualifications meet the nation's economic and social needs, contribute to the quality assurance arrangements for providers and qualification delivery, improve pathways to employment, improve pathways through education (credit transfer, articulation and recognition of prior learning) and support international recognition of national qualifications.

Qualification frameworks are rapidly emerging throughout the world in response to the global mobility of skilled labour and students seeking internationally marketable qualifications. Employers are demanding qualifications as a means of verifying the skills of workers and individuals are demanding the recognition of their skills through qualifications. Qualifications provide a measurement for a nation's stock of skills.

The Australian Qualifications Framework is national policy. It sets the standards for qualification outcomes. The AQF applies to all qualifications that are in the regulated education and training sectors. It encompasses higher education, vocational education and training and senior school schooling. It is embedded in the legislation that governs and/or funds these sectors.

Standards for qualification outcomes are not new in Australia. In fact, Australia has a long history of qualification standards. Australia adopted the national *Nomenclature and Guidelines for Awards in Advanced Education* in 1972. The first national standards for qualifications were introduced to improve consistency in higher education across the nation. During the 1980s, this was expanded to include Certificates and Diplomas. In 1995, the comprehensive national qualifications

framework was introduced to cover all education and training sectors and support cross-sectoral pathways.

The development of the AQF in the early 1990s coincided with the emergence in the late 1980s of the vocational education and training sector as a distinct third sector of education. This was in response to the economic need for skilled workers and paraprofessionals. The national system of vocational education and training is now well established in Australia and internationally recognised. Its mission is training individuals for occupational and work-related outcomes. Industry is a key partner with its contribution to setting occupational outcomes that are embedded in qualifications.

The AQF is an integral part of the Australian education system and labour market. In the education system, the AQF underpins the quality assurance arrangements for the provision of education and training. In the labour market, AQF qualifications are, for example: required for occupational licensing and professional accreditation, embedded in industrial awards, required for skilled migration, and provide the basis for the national census data on the skill level of the population.

The AQF is more than setting the standards for qualifications. The need for improved qualification outcomes is driven by the needs of the workplace and the Australian economy. Hence a key objective for the AQF is to support qualifications that contribute to national economic performance. Supporting pathways from education to work, that is aligning qualifications with employment, is an important objective of the AQF as is providing pathways for students within education to support the attainment of qualifications and reduce the burden of repeating learning is an important objective. The underpinning philosophy of the AQF is lifelong learning. Supporting the national and international mobility of students and graduates (workers) through the comparability and alignment of qualifications is a key objective.

In 2008 the owners of the AQF (all education and employment ministers) decided to review the AQF 14 years after it commenced. Ministers appointed a new governing body, the AQF Council, to lead the review. During 2009 and 2010, national discussions led by the AQF Council occurred on what Australia wanted from its national qualifications framework. Debate was sometime fierce, reflecting the strong sense of ownership by AQF stakeholders. By April 2011, full agreement for the changes was reached by the education and employment ministers. Implementation commenced on 1 July 2011.

Reasons for changes to the AQF were to: improve the contemporary relevance and the national consistency of qualification outcomes, improve cross sectoral student pathways, re-establish the AQF as the foundation for improved quality assurance arrangements for education and training, and increase the recognition of the value of Australian qualifications and enable international comparability of the AQF.

The changes were made in the context of other educational reforms, including: the move to national regulation of qualifications and providers in higher education and vocational education and training from state-based arrangements, the move towards national curriculum for schooling, ambitious targets for increases in qualification attainment from each of the sectors, changes to funding for higher education, and reforms related to the international student market.

The organising framework of the AQF is a taxonomic structure of levels and qualification types, each of which is defined by a taxonomy of learning outcomes. The focus is on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and the application of knowledge and skills as students' progress through their education and working lives. The 10 levels depict the increasing complexity and intellectual demands of qualifications. The levels are therefore necessarily hierarchical even though students do not necessarily move hierarchically. The explicit levels structure has been overlaid on the existing 16 qualification types. The descriptors for each qualification type are consistently expressed, regardless of the sector. The common language of all qualifications is intended to assist with negotiating and designing pathways between general education and competency based training to maximise potential credit.

The AQF is an integrated policy. As well as the standards for each qualification type, the AQF provides the national policy requirements: for issuing AQF qualifications, qualifications linkages and student pathways, and for the registers of qualifications and providers.

The operation of the AQF occurs in the context of nationally agreed arrangements. The legal basis for the AQF is through Commonwealth and State Governments' legislation. All AQF qualifications must be accredited by government authorised accrediting authorities. Only government accredited providers can deliver, assess and issue AQF qualifications. Providers must meet minimum standards to be accredited and to retain accreditation. Accrediting authorities monitor providers to ensure the quality of qualifications issued, even those providers that are empowered to self-accredit.

Key stakeholders of the AQF are the government accrediting authorities for higher education, vocational education and training and senior secondary schooling,

including those providers that self accredit (mostly universities), and the agencies responsible for developing qualifications for accreditation. As the users of qualifications, employers and their representative bodies, employees and their unions, and students and their representative bodies are also key stakeholders. Other stakeholders are many and varied and include: the providers delivering qualifications (universities and higher education providers, public and private VET providers, school authorities that are responsible for the issuance of the senior school certificate), agencies that accredit professionals for practice and occupational licensing authorities, other standards setting bodies for education, and all governments responsible for education policy and funding, research, migration and national statistics.

The AQF enables the integration of qualification development, qualification delivery and graduate achievement with the needs of the labour market through the systematic interaction of its stakeholders.

The AQF is owned and funded by all Australian governments. The AQF Council is a council of the national ministers for education, training and employment and is established under their authority to govern the AQF on a day-to-day basis. It is responsible to its ministerial councils for providing strategic and authoritative advice on the AQF. The AQF Council has delegated authority to monitor and maintain the AQF, support its users and promote AQF qualifications to the community.

The AQF Council is comprised of 10 members with expertise and experience in the following sectors: higher education, vocational education and training, schools, employers, unions and government and an observer from New Zealand. Membership is non-representative with an independent chair to ensure that its advice benefits Australia's education system as a whole.