

Incorporating shorter form credentials into the AQF

The shorter form credentials that the AQF Review is considering for inclusion in the AQF are:

- Skill sets
- Incomplete qualifications
- Short courses (in vocational education and training (VET) these are based on accredited units of competency and termed a 'course in (subject)' but they are also relevant to curriculum based higher education short courses
- Enabling and Foundation courses
- Micro-credentials
- Professional and Vendor Qualifications
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

The benefits for qualifications types of being recognised within the AQF include the reputation for quality education provided by Australia's regulated tertiary education environment. It may also increase the transparency of what is being offered by shorter form credentials and what is to be gained by attaining one.

This paper describes the main features of each of the shorter form credentials under consideration. It considers the requirements of the AQF and whether and how the credentials could be included.

Current AQF Requirements

Currently, any qualification type listed in the AQF must:

1. be able to be quality-assured under government approved standards
2. be able to be accredited by an authority authorised under legislation
3. be described according to the AQF descriptions of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, the application of knowledge and skills and generic learning outcomes)
4. be able to be located at an existing AQF level
5. have clear pathways within the AQF
6. not duplicate an existing AQF qualification type, and
7. meet a defined industry, professional or community need.

With some adaptation to account for the nature of short study, these criteria could be adopted to help decide what shorter form credentials could be included in the AQF. Shorter form credentials that are already part of the regulatory system would most readily meet these criteria. They are skill sets, incomplete qualifications and regulated short courses.

There may be challenges in assigning shorter form credential types¹ to AQF levels because it is likely that shorter form credential types will span a number of AQF levels. To enable students and employers to know what level of learning has been achieved, it will be necessary to have a means of assigning individual credentials, for example a MOOC in project management, to an AQF level. Shorter form

¹ Note that the AQF assigns qualification types to an AQF level, not individual qualifications. For example, the qualification type Certificate III is assigned to AQF Level 3. As a result, all Certificate III qualifications are AQF Level 3 qualifications, regardless of the qualification discipline.

credentials that are already regulated, or have a relationship to currently regulated qualifications, may be able to be assigned to an AQF level. Unregulated credentials, however, may need to be assigned to an AQF level by an existing or new agency, as is the case in some other countries.

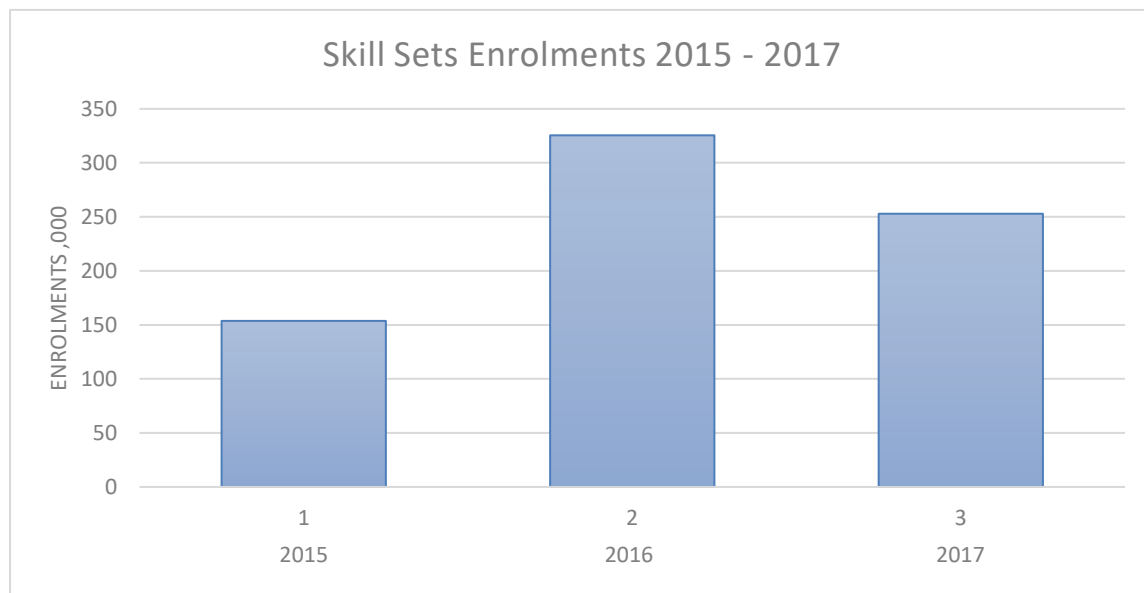
Skill Sets

Within the VET sector, skill sets are distinct groupings of one or more units of competency that define the required skills and knowledge of a job, task or function in the workplace. They are developed as part of the training package process and linked to a licensing or regulatory requirement, or a defined industry need.²

A discussion paper on training product reform issued in December 2017 suggests that, by linking some skill sets to qualifications, a learner could build up to a full qualification by completing additional specific skill sets on top of the core units, or more readily change specialisation by completing additional skill sets.³ Under this approach, qualifications would remain the comprehensive foundation for a skilled worker, with skill sets providing supplementary studies to facilitate upskilling.

Figure 1 shows that enrolments in skills sets has increased in recent years.

Figure 1: Enrolments in skill sets 2015 - 2017⁴



Skill sets consist of units of competency that can be associated with any VET courses, and could span many levels of the AQF. For this reason, it would not be possible to assign skill sets as a qualification type to any one AQF level. The qualification type would need to be assigned to a broad band of AQF levels.

It would be necessary, and may be possible, to assign individual skill sets to an AQF level. Skill sets consist of one or more units of competency, and units of competency are component parts of training packages that include full AQF qualifications. The full AQF qualification will sit at an agreed AQF level and the related skill set possibly could be assigned to the same level.

Therefore, skill sets already meet most of the criteria outlined above for potential inclusion in the AQF. Skill sets offered by a regulated entity or utilising units of competency are quality assured. They do

² Commonwealth of Australia, [Training Product Reform: Issues for Discussion](#), 2017, p. 6

³ Commonwealth of Australia, [Training Product Reform: Issues for Discussion](#), 2017, p. 6

⁴ NCVET, VOCSTATS Enrolment in skill sets 2014-2016

not duplicate an existing AQF qualification type and are popular in industry and business and in professional development. They have a possible pathway role in building on existing qualifications.

Incomplete Qualifications

The AQF Qualifications Issuance Policy recognises incomplete qualifications using a 'Statement of Attainment'.⁵ Within higher education, students who complete one or more units of study that do not lead to the award of a qualification have access to an authorised record of results for the units undertaken.⁶ This may be called a transcript, an academic record or other term (including statement of attainment). The Standards for Registered Training Organisations 2015 provide that a statement of attainment can be issued to a person confirming that the person has satisfied the requirements of the unit/s of competency or accredited short course specified in the statement.⁷

VET appears to offer more positive recognition of incomplete qualifications. This may be because some single units of competency meet a recognised industry need, for example for the responsible service of alcohol. By contrast, there appears to be less positive recognition of incomplete qualifications in the higher education system, which may be associated with 'dropping out'. Attrition rates for Australian universities in 2016 were similar to those in 2005 at slightly less than 15 per cent.⁸ Therefore, many incomplete qualifications may benefit from improved recognition that could be provided by exit points and nested degrees or by recognising incomplete qualifications as a credential type within the AQF.

Incomplete qualifications are a subset of an existing AQF qualification. They should therefore meet the criteria for inclusion in the AQF. While the pathway for an incomplete qualification would not be the same as for a complete qualification, better recognition of incomplete qualifications in the AQF may improve recognition of this form or prior learning as a pathway to further learning.

Qualifications are assigned to AQF levels based on what outcomes are achieved by completing the whole qualification. Incomplete qualifications may therefore not achieve that same AQF level as the whole qualification. The AQF level achieved may depend on the amount of the qualification completed and what subjects/units of competency are completed.

Short courses

Under the Standards for VET Accredited Courses 2012, VET courses can lead to a qualification that has outcomes consistent with an AQF qualification descriptor and are therefore AQF qualifications.⁹ Alternatively, they can lead to a statement of attainment when course outcomes meet an identified industry or community need but do not have the breadth and depth required for an AQF qualification. These courses are titled 'Course in...'.¹⁰

Courses titled 'Course in...' are accredited by a VET regulator and would meet the proposed criteria for inclusion in the AQF in the same way that skill sets do. As with skill sets, if short courses were an AQF qualification type they may not be able to be aligned to any one AQF level. However, individual 'courses in...' may be able to be aligned to an AQF level by the use of units of competency. While individual units of competency are not assigned to an AQF level, it may be possible to determine what qualifications they are most commonly used in and derive the appropriate AQF level from those

⁵ AQF Council, [Australian Qualifications Framework Second Edition](#), 2013, p. 73

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, [Higher Education Standards Framework](#), 2015, Standard 1.5.10

⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, [Standards for Registered Training Organisations](#), 2015, Schedule 5

⁸ Department of Education and Training, [Attrition, Retention and Success Rates for Commencing Higher Education Students 2005-2016](#)

⁹ These courses may not be short, as they would need to comply with the volume of learning descriptor.

¹⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, [Standards for VET Accredited Courses 2012](#), Clause 7.3

qualifications.

In VET, there are also courses that are not part of nationally recognised training because they have not been accredited by a VET regulator.¹¹ As such, they would not meet the criteria outlined above for inclusion in the AQF. These courses include locally recognised courses and locally recognised skill sets.

In higher education, short courses include practical training courses for employment accreditation purposes as well as bridging courses for course pre-requisite requirements. Higher education providers can offer non-AQF compliant courses provided the courses are not described using AQF nomenclature or implied to be an AQF qualification or an equivalent qualification.¹²

However, any course developed by a registered higher education provider must meet the requirements of the Higher Education Standards Framework 2015,¹³ which outline the quality requirements for course design, learning and assessment. Because of this provision, short courses delivered by self-accrediting or non-self-accrediting higher education providers should meet most of the requirements for inclusion in the AQF.

Enabling courses, Foundation courses

Enabling courses and Foundation courses are designed to enable access to university, but in slightly different ways.

An Enabling course is a course of instruction that enables a person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award but does not lead to a higher education award in itself.¹⁴ In 2017 there were 19,474 higher education enrolments in enabling courses.¹⁵

There are other, enabling-like courses variously referred to as Foundation Studies, Foundation Programs, Special Entry Programs, or Alternative Entry Programs.¹⁶ A Foundation course, like an Enabling course, is usually a course of instruction that prepares a person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award. Unlike an Enabling course, the study may contribute to the completion requirements of the higher education award. This will rely on the articulation agreements in place between the Foundation course provider and the partnering higher education provider (noting that the two providers may be the same entity).

Quite different from the higher education based Foundation courses, in the VET sector there is a foundation skills training package containing two Certificate I and one Certificate II courses, with over 300 registered training organisations (RTOs) having it on scope.¹⁷ These foundation courses offer basic training in literacy, numeracy, or more specific skills such as typing, and computer skills and may provide a pathway to employment. There are also two accredited courses on the topic of university preparation and access, registered at Certificate IV level.¹⁸

It could be argued that since higher education Enabling and Foundation courses prepare students for bachelor level study at AQF Level 7, it may be possible to assign them to AQF Level 5 or Level 6. However, other existing qualifications also prepare students for bachelor level study that are not level five or six qualifications. These include the senior secondary school certificate and various level four qualifications in tertiary preparation. When VET Foundation courses are also considered, it is evident that Enabling and Foundation courses will span a number of AQF levels.

¹¹ NCVER, [What are Nationally Recognised Training and Accredited Training?](#), 2017, p.1

¹² Commonwealth of Australia, [Higher Education Standards Framework](#), 2015, Standard 1.5.9

¹³ Commonwealth of Australia, [The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011](#)

¹⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, [Higher Education Support Act 2003](#), Schedule 1

¹⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, [Higher Education Statistics 2017](#)

¹⁶ Habel, C. Et al., [Exploring the Experience of Low-SES Students via Enabling Pathways](#), 2016, p.5

¹⁷ [Foundation Skills Training Package](#).

¹⁸ Australian Government, [training.gov.au](#), 52835WA Certificate IV in University Access Program and 10246NAT Certificate IV in University Preparation

Enabling and Foundation courses are able to be quality-assured, can under government approved standards, can be described according to the AQF descriptions of learning outcomes, by their nature have clear pathways, do not duplicate an existing AQF qualification type and meet a defined industry, professional or community need. Additionally, they could be assigned to an AQF level by a nominated agency and so meet the criteria for inclusion in the AQF.

Micro-credentials

Contextual research for the AQF Review found that 'while RPL and workplace learning are encouraged by the AQF there are no mechanisms within the Australian system to regulate or quality assure credit towards formal qualifications for in-service or informal learning or micro-credentials in a way that ensures national or international consistency. The need for these sorts of practices is emerging in Australia. Currently, the AQF does not readily facilitate/accommodate this.¹⁹

Demand for and provision of micro-credentials is increasing in Australia. This is apparent from the growing number of providers offering micro-credentials. For example:

- RMIT launched a pilot to create an innovative suite of micro-credentials developed with industry partners and is open to all students
- Curtin University offers a MicroMasters Program which is offered through the EdX platform
- Deakin University (through DeakinDigital and Deakin Hallmarks) has implemented a digital credentialing system and digital badging system
- TAFE NSW offers micro-credentials that are designed to help develop specific industry-recognised skills to address workplace and career progression needs
- Griffith University has established a policy on micro-credentialing which provides the framework for approval of university micro-credentials as well as micro-credentials undertaken in partnership with third parties
- UNSW Canberra is offering micro-credential postgraduate courses and is granting credit into them from specified professional education courses.

Micro-credentials meet some of the criteria discussed earlier for potential inclusion within the AQF. They meet a defined industry or community need, do not duplicate an existing qualification type and could be described according to the AQF descriptions of learning outcomes.

However, micro-credentials are not currently quality assured under any government-approved standards, nor accredited by a regulator. To be considered for inclusion in the AQF, micro-credentials would need to demonstrate that a reliable form of assessment was undertaken.

The level of learning offered by micro-credentials as a credential type could span a number of AQF levels. Micro-credentials are unregulated. As a credential type they do not have a relationship to existing AQF qualifications.²⁰ For these reasons, there is no ready, existing means of assigning micro-credentials to AQF levels. However, an existing agency, or one established for the purpose, could be given the task of assigning individual micro-credentials to an AQF level. This approach is currently being employed in New Zealand.

Professional and Vendor Qualifications

Professional and Vendor qualifications can fill a gap for enterprises and governments that wish to train

¹⁹ PhillipsKPA, [Contextual Research for the Australian Qualifications Framework Review](#), 2018, p. 7

²⁰ The Australian Technology Network grouping of universities has proposed that micro-credentials could be formed from component parts of existing AQF qualifications. In this case, micro-credentials would have a relationship to AQF qualifications.

staff in specific areas (and award staff with a form of certification), without incurring the expense and time required by a full AQF qualification. While they are not nationally recognised qualifications, they indicate within organisations that the staff member has completed required training for internal purposes. Often they are 'certificates of attendance'.

Many industries offer vendor qualifications that have currency across businesses within the industry. Information Technology credentials are often offered in-house but confirm transferable skills. An example is the large range of Microsoft Certified Professional credentials available for online study and offering skills relevant to the Microsoft/Windows environment.²¹ Industry itself quality assures these courses and as a result, the reputation of the course is a measure of its quality.

Like micro-credentials, professional and vendor qualifications meet some of the criteria discussed earlier for potential inclusion within the AQF. They meet a defined industry or community need, do not duplicate an existing qualification type and could be described according to the AQF descriptions of learning outcomes.

However, professional and vendor micro-credentials are not currently quality assured under any government-approved standards, nor accredited by a regulator. To be considered for inclusion in the AQF, micro-credentials would need to demonstrate that a reliable form of assessment was undertaken. This occurs with many vendor qualifications, but is not the case with courses that only issue a certificate of attendance. The same difficulties and possibilities that apply to assigning micro-credentials to an AQF level would also apply to professional and vendor qualifications.

Massive Open Online Courses

Learning via Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) largely occurs outside existing credentialing systems. MOOCs are online courses designed for large numbers of participants that can be accessed by anyone anywhere as long as they have an internet connection. Noting it is difficult to definitively confirm MOOC offerings coming from any specific nation, there appears to have been at least 250 MOOCs or MOOC-like courses offered by Australian universities in 2017.

Like micro-credentials, MOOCs meet some of the criteria discussed earlier for potential inclusion within the AQF. They meet a defined industry or community need, do not duplicate an existing qualification type and could be described according to the AQF descriptions of learning outcomes.

However, MOOCs are not currently quality assured under any government-approved standards, nor accredited by a regulator. To be considered for inclusion in the AQF, MOOCs would need to demonstrate that a reliable form of assessment was undertaken. The same difficulties and possibilities that apply to assigning micro-credentials to an AQF level would also apply to professional and vendor qualifications.

Non-AQF Certificates

Other credentials offered in Australia that are not in the AQF include certification in the study of music and languages.

The Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB) recognition system is widely used in Australia. It provides a system for teaching and assessing musical ability covering many instruments, singing, voice and drama. Ability is assessed through a system of grades (preliminary to grade 8). Of note is that higher-level credentials are described by the AMEB as 'diplomas' even though 'diploma' is used in AQF terminology (noting that the AMEB was established in 1928 and may have been using the term diploma long before the AQF).

The AMEB system has links with the AQF in a number of ways. AMEB credentials are recognised by a

²¹ Microsoft, [Explore Microsoft Certifications](#)

number of Australian and international universities. AMEB credentials from grade 7 upwards can also improve an applicant's ranking for tertiary entry. Tasmania allows certain grades of AMEB to contribute to the Tasmanian Certificate of Education.²² A student may receive an alternative Queensland Tertiary Admission Centre (QTAC) selection rank if they have completed Grade 7 and above practical, and Grade 3 and above theory.²³ In South Australia, some AMEB grades provide credit for the Senior School Certificate of Education, or provide the assumed knowledge for entry to the Elder Conservatorium of Music (University of Adelaide) degree and diploma courses.

Languages are taught by many types of organisations and through many types of credentials. Organisations teaching languages include universities and other higher education providers, institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and other types of organisations. Language qualifications outside the AQF include ELICOS as well as continuing education courses. There are also AQF certificates, diplomas and degrees available within the study of languages.

One example of a language teaching system outside the AQF is provided by the Alliance Française. The Alliance Française system is similar to the AMEB, in that it provides a graded system for measuring and teaching French. The Alliance Française system is linked to a French Ministry of Education system of diplomas that certify the French language competence of non-native French speakers.

There are a number of international assessment systems for different languages that are outside the AQF. The two main English language assessment systems are the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Given that some of these other credentials pre-date the AQF, and are already recognised on their own merit, these industries may not see the value of being included in the AQF, in particular given the potential cost of regulation required to be included.

²² ACACA, [VET in Senior Secondary Certificates of Education](#), 2015 , p.47

²³ Australian Music Examinations Board (QLD), [FAQs](#), 2017