

*Strengthening the AQF: an architecture for Australia's qualifications*

Griffith University welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Australian Qualifications Framework Council's consultation paper *Strengthening the AQF: an architecture for Australia's qualifications*. Griffith commends the Council's progress with strengthening the Australian qualifications framework and broadly supports the Council's approach. The university notes that awareness of the Council's work is growing in the sector and that some colleagues are now raising issues that were considered in the Council's consultation paper of May 2009 and even principles that were established in the former register of Australian tertiary education in 1991.

**Number of qualification types and their main distinguishing criteria**

Universities use several criteria to distinguish between numerous types of qualification for the purposes of student admission and progression. The Council will consider which of those criteria and types of qualification are appropriate and sufficiently important and which are used sufficiently widely to be recognised in a national qualifications framework which is used by employers and the general community and other educational sectors in addition to higher education. Table 1 shows the number and proportion of tertiary education qualifications awarded for 2007, the most recent year for which figures are available.

Table 1: number and proportion of tertiary qualifications awarded, 2007

<b>Level of program</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>% of all</b>
Higher doctorate	28	0.005
Doctorate by research	5,721	1
Doctorate by coursework	274	0.05
Master's by research	1,420	0.2
Master's by coursework	52,029	9
Postgraduate qualifying/preliminary	26	0.004
Graduate (post) diploma - new area	14,038	2
Graduate (post) diploma - extended area	5,787	1
Graduate certificate	13,264	2
Bachelor's graduate entry	3,908	1
Bachelor's honours	10,162	2
Bachelor's pass	129,970	22
Associate degree	1,735	0.3
Advanced diploma (higher education)	1,116	0.2
Diploma (higher education)	7,213	1
Other undergraduate award courses	835	0.1
Vocational education diploma or higher	49,000	8
Certificate IV	59,200	10
Certificate III	121,300	21
Certificate II	78,300	13
Certificate I	27,200	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>582,526</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2008) table 1: award course completions for all students by citizenship and level of course, 1996 to 2007; National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2009) Table 16: number of qualification completions, 2004–07.

The highest qualification awarded by universities is the higher doctorate, typically the doctor of laws, the doctor of letters and the doctor of science. Many higher doctorates are awarded to honour people of distinction, but some are awarded following an examination of the candidate's academic work. Notwithstanding the higher doctorate's prominence as the highest award, it should not be included in the Australian qualifications framework because it is used neither widely nor commonly.

*Griffith University recommends that the principles for adding qualification types include that the proposed qualification type be used widely and that that it be used commonly.*

Universities commonly distinguish between predominantly coursework and research degrees and this distinction is important in determining progression to a research career or to senior levels of a profession.

*Griffith University therefore recommends that qualification types be added for doctorate by research and coursework and masters by research and coursework.*

*For the same reason Griffith University also recommends that a qualifications type be added for bachelor with honours awarded after the completion of one year of study more than an ordinary bachelor's degree.*

Universities commonly distinguish between qualifications by their normal entry criterion. Thus, a coursework postgraduate certificate, diploma and masters which normally requires for entry a bachelor degree in the field and thus extends extensive knowledge in the field is usually distinguished from a coursework postgraduate certificate, diploma and masters which does not normally require a bachelor degree in the field and thus broadens the graduate's knowledge. This distinction is also common at the bachelor level where a bachelor degree which requires another bachelor degree for entry is commonly distinguished from a bachelor degree which normally requires a senior secondary certificate for entry. A prominent example is the bachelor of surgery which requires the bachelor of medicine for entry.

Normal minimum entry criterion is an input to a qualification and thus is a qualitatively different criterion to the learning outcomes which have long been used as the main distinguishing characteristic of types of qualifications in the Australian qualifications framework. Some may argue that since it is an input normal minimum entry criterion may introduce unwarranted inflexibility into qualifications and stifle innovative ways of offering qualifications to non traditional students. However, normal minimum entry criterion characterised qualifications in the former register of Australian tertiary education and will remain important in distinguishing qualifications regardless of whether it is formally recognised in the Australian qualifications framework.

*Griffith University recommends that where appropriate normal minimum entry criterion be used as one of the criteria to distinguish type of qualification in the Australian qualifications framework.*

*Griffith University further recommends that a qualification type be added for a coursework masters degree that normally requires for entry a bachelor degree in the master's field, or if normal entry criterion is not accepted as an appropriate criterion, a coursework masters that extends existing skills and knowledge in the area.*

*Griffith University further recommends that a qualification type be added for a postgraduate diploma that normally requires for entry a bachelor degree in the diploma's field, or if normal entry criterion is not accepted as an appropriate criterion, a postgraduate diploma that extends existing skills and knowledge in the area.*

The proposed qualifications framework separates graduate certificates and graduate diplomas according to whether they are accredited as vocational or higher education qualifications, but it does not separate diplomas and advanced diplomas according to whether they are accredited as vocational or higher education qualifications. Some vocational education institutions drop the 'vocational' from the title of their vocational graduate certificates and diplomas, thus confusing the distinction between vocational and other graduate certificates and diplomas. If graduate diplomas are distinguished by their normal minimum entry criterion or by whether they extend existing skills and knowledge or introduce a new area there would be no need to distinguish graduate diplomas by whether they are accredited as vocational or higher education qualifications.

*Griffith University therefore recommends that the graduate certificate and diploma not be distinguished by sector of accreditation just as the diploma and advanced diploma is not distinguished by sector of accreditation.*

### **Level of senior secondary certificate of education**

Griffith supports the placement of the senior secondary certificate of education at level 3 since this will help to establish relativities between qualifications. While it is true that some senior secondary certificates include studies at a lower level, in this they are no different from many bachelors and masters degrees which also include lower level studies. The important point is that upon completing a qualification the graduate has achieved the qualification's level. Including senior secondary certificates at level 3 should also help to curb credential creep whereby schools seek to offer ever higher level vocational education qualifications which devalues these qualifications as post-school qualifications.

### **Trade qualifications**

There is no reason for trade qualifications to be separate kinds of qualifications - differentiating them in this way would create difficulties for pathways and credit transfer. Rather, the issue is the appropriate location of trade qualifications on the qualifications framework. This should be decided according to their learning outcomes and the complexity of knowledge and skills that they require rather than a predetermined designation of all trade qualifications at the same level.

### **Principles for removing a qualification type**

*Griffith University recommends that the principles for removing a qualification type include:*

- 1 where the qualification type is not sufficiently different in level or attributes from another qualification type;*

- 2 where the qualification type is not used sufficiently widely;
- 3 where the qualification type is not used sufficiently commonly indicated by it being awarded to a relatively few graduates.

### **Notional duration of student learning**

Griffith strongly supports the notional duration of student learning proposed by the Council. The university understands that the qualifications architecture proposed by the Council may be summarised by the following table.

Table 2: qualifications architecture proposed by the Australian Qualifications Framework Council, September 2009

<b>Level</b>	<b>Qualification</b>	<b>Notional duration of student learning</b>
10	Doctoral degree	3 - 5 years
9	Masters degree	1.5 - 2 years
8	Graduate diploma	1 - 2 years
	Vocational graduate diploma	
	Graduate certificate	0.5 years
	Vocational graduate certificate	
7	Bachelor degree	3 - 4 years
6	Associate degree	2 years
	Advanced diploma	1.5 - 2 years
5	Diploma	1.5 - 2 years
4	Certificate IV	0.5 - 2 years
3	Certificate III	1 - 2 years
	Senior Secondary Certificate of Education	2 years
2	Certificate II	0.5 - 1 year
1	Certificate I	3 - 6 months

Source: adapted from Australian Qualifications Framework Council (2009) table 2: AQF qualification type descriptors, pages 14-15.

Griffith believes that the range of the notional duration of certificate IV of from 0.5 to 2 years is too big and would allow too much variation in these qualifications. The university understands that some qualifications build on skills already acquired by students as the Council says in its note to table 2. But this should be handled by specifying a longer duration and granting students credit for accredited or unaccredited prior learning.

*Griffith University recommends that the notional duration of certificate IV be 1 - 2 years.*

Griffith supports the Council's proposal that the notional duration of masters be 1.5 to 2 years since this helps to distinguish it from graduate diplomas. Arguably all masters should be 2 years following a 3 year degree to be consistent with the Bologna declaration. While all universities have numerous masters of 1 to 1.5 years' duration following a 3 year degree, this is a recent erosion of the current standard. Furthermore, a recent UK report (Bone, 2008: 2) noted that international feeling may be turning against 1 year masters -

It is also worth noting at this point that while the one year masters has traditionally been competitive because of its short length and hence relatively low cost, the global feeling may be turning against it. In China specifically, perhaps under German influence, there seems to be a growing concern amongst employers over the value of the one-year masters. Moreover, tailored and industry-specific masters are increasingly in demand, and inevitably have high development costs. This market, so important to the UK, is far from stable. It will be necessary for the UK to remain flexible on masters' length provision should global employers insist on a 2 year degree, but we must note that this would seriously disadvantage us in cost terms.

(Bone, 2008: 2)

### **Taxonomy of learning outcomes - affective attributes**

*Griffith University recommends that affective attributes such as cultural competence and ethical values be included in the taxonomy of learning outcomes.*

### **Further education**

The level attributes for level 1 states the further education attribute as -

Knowledge and skills that prepare for further learning . . .

The same phrase is used for the further education attributes of levels 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. However, the further education attribute for level 3 is -

Knowledge and skills for further higher education and training . . .

Presumably the Council has in mind the senior secondary certificate of education at level 3 which prepares students for vocational and higher education. However, Griffith suggests that the proposed further education attribute for level 3 is too specific and that 'further learning . . .' is sufficient to encompass vocational education, higher education and other forms of further education.

Griffith strongly supports the Council's proposal to build levels into the qualifications framework explicitly. It is important for education to build on learning at lower levels and to prepare graduates for learning at higher levels. This structures education appropriately and ensures that graduates progress in level as well as type of education. However, all qualifications can't prepare graduates for all learning at a higher level; they can prepare graduates only for further education in their field. It is therefore important that the qualifications framework recognises that educational progression is based on knowledge and skills specific to a field of study; knowledge and skills aren't so general or generic that they support progression from a level in field A to a higher level in field B.

*Griffith University therefore recommends that the further education attribute for levels 1 to 8 be knowledge and skills for further learning at a higher level within a field . . .'*

## **Further education ‘and/or’ employment**

Griffith believes that all qualifications should prepare graduates both for employment and for further education in the field, although the balance between preparing for employment and further education may vary between qualifications and institutions. This gives students the choice of proceeding to employment or further education upon graduation. It also lays the foundation for continuing occupational development for graduates who proceed to employment.

In table 1: AQF levels attributes and criteria the level attributes for level 1 are -

Knowledge and skills that prepare for further learning and initial employment.

This is appropriate in Griffith’s view, as are the attributes for level 2. However, the attributes for level 3 are -

Knowledge and skills for further higher education and training and/or skilled employment.

This allows for a qualification at level 3 to prepare graduates only for further education or only for employment. ‘And/or’ also appears in the descriptions for levels 4 and 5 but not for qualifications at any other level. In Griffith’s view this would be too narrow an outcome for a qualification. Graduates may choose to do one or the other, but they should be equipped to do both. Having only a further education or occupational outcome for a qualification is inconsistent with most Australian qualifications. It is also inconsistent with the broad orientation of Australian education since the 1970s away from the ‘tracked’ systems that prepared graduates for employment or further education but not both, to a comprehensive system that accommodates plural goals within one system, institution and qualification.

*Griffith University therefore recommends that ‘and’ be substituted for ‘and/or’ in the attributes for levels 3, 4 and 5.*

*For the same reasons Griffith University recommends that ‘and’ be substituted for ‘and/or’ in the purposes of all qualifications from certificate III to masters in table 2.*

## **Skills learning outcomes for levels 3 and 4**

*Griffith University recommends that the differences in the skills learning outcomes for levels 3 and 4 be increased to indicate educational progression.*

## **Application of knowledge and skills - supervision of staff**

The learning outcome application of knowledge and skills for level 4 includes -

... can be responsible for others within established parameters.

Likewise the learning outcome application of knowledge and skills for levels 5 and 6 also include supervising staff, but this outcome is absent from the higher levels. This seems anomalous. On the one hand, many young people complete qualifications at levels 4, 5 and 6

but have neither the experience nor the maturity to supervise others. On the other, many graduates of qualifications of level 7 and above are expected to supervise staff.

Responsibility for supervising staff is a requirement of particular jobs and may be the outcome of particular qualifications but it is not outcome of all qualifications at a specified level.

*Griffith University therefore recommends that the staff supervision outcomes be removed from levels 4, 5 and 6.*

*For the same reasons Griffith University recommends that ‘collaborate with others’ be substituted for the staff supervision outcomes in the application of knowledge and skills in table 2 for certificate IV, diploma, advanced diploma, and level 8 qualifications.*

### **Participation in civic life**

In table 2 AQF qualification type descriptors the purpose of the senior secondary certificate of education is -

The completion of secondary schooling providing a pathway for further learning, work and participation in civic life.

The purposes of bachelors include -

. . . to prepare for advanced learning and to engage in civic life.

However, participation or engagement in civic life is not included in the purposes of any other qualification. This would mean that many reasonably highly qualified graduates - up to level 6 - would not be prepared for participation or engagement in civic life. Griffith proposes that all entry level qualifications should prepare graduates for participation or engagement in civic life. This would not mean that all programs would have specific ‘civics’ subjects, but that the curriculum should be sufficiently broad to help graduates develop social understandings and insights, even if these are framed by their particular occupational area of practice.

*Griffith University therefore recommends that ‘participation in civic life’ be included in the purposes of qualifications at levels 3 to 6.*

### **Cognitive and communication skills**

In table 2 AQF qualification type descriptors the skills for advanced diplomas include -

Cognitive and communication skills to formulate responses to complex problems.

However, the analogous skill for associate degrees and levels 7 and 8 include -

Cognitive and communication skills to formulate responses to defined problems . . .

*Griffith University recommends that ‘defined’ be substituted for ‘complex’ in the skills for advanced diplomas.*

## Recommended qualifications architecture

In summary, Griffith University recommends the qualifications architecture set out in the table below.

Table 3: qualifications architecture recommended by Griffith University

Level	Qualification	Notional duration of student learning
10	Doctoral degree by research	3 - 5 years
	Doctoral degree by coursework	3 - 5 years
9	Masters degree by research	1.5 - 2 years
	Masters degree by course work - extended area	1.5 - 2 years
	Graduate diploma - extended area	1 - 2 years
8	Graduate certificate - extended area	0.5 years
	Bachelor with honours	1 year
7	Masters degree by course work - new area	1.5 - 2 years
	Graduate diploma - new area	1 - 2 years
	Graduate certificate - new area	0.5 years
6	Bachelor degree	3 - 4 years
	Associate degree	2 years
5	Advanced diploma	1.5 - 2 years
4	Diploma	1.5 - 2 years
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## Materials to support the consistent application of the strengthened framework

The Australian Qualifications Framework Council could support the consistent application of the strengthened framework by establishing a web site showing model programs for each type of qualification and a toolkit for assessing the combinations of knowledge, skills and application that form each type of qualification. It would also be very valuable for the Australian Qualifications Framework Council to introduce the strengthened framework and toolkit in a workshop in each state.

*Griffith University recommends that the Australian Qualifications Framework Council consider introducing measures to support the consistent application of the strengthened Australian qualifications framework.*

## Expert judgement still required

The Australian Qualifications Framework Council has made excellent progress in specifying qualification attributes, criteria and descriptions. However, no qualification can be specified sufficiently precisely to avoid the need for experts to make judgements in admitting students to a program and granting them credit for previous study. While the need for expert judgement in decisions on the transfer of students and credit is sometimes used to cloak snobbery or to protect student load, this does not gainsay the need to exercise expert judgement to maintain

academic standards and to ensure that students have a fair opportunity to complete the programs to which they are admitted. No university automatically admits students from another university or gives them credit for previous study, and some faculties assess the qualifications and credit of graduates of other faculties even from the same university.

Griffith University looks forward to further progress with strengthening the Australian qualifications framework.

## References

Australian Qualifications Framework Council (2009) *Strengthening the AQF: an architecture for Australia's qualifications*. Consultation paper, September 2009, <http://www.aqf.edu.au/Portals/0/Strengthening%20the%20AQF%20-%20An%20Architecture%20for%20Australias%20Qualifications.pdf> (accessed 1 October 2009).

Bone, Drummond (2008) *International issues in higher education*, [http://www.dius.gov.uk/higher\\_education/shape\\_and\\_structure/he\\_debate/international\\_issues](http://www.dius.gov.uk/higher_education/shape_and_structure/he_debate/international_issues) (accessed 10 October 2009).

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