

An Introduction To The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

Dr. Sudesh Kumar Garg¹

Abstract

1995 saw the introduction of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). It offered standards for characterising qualifications according to the features and results of education for every qualification. The primary objectives of the AQF were to enable student mobility between educational sectors and the labour market and to provide nationally consistent recognition of qualifications.

2011 saw the release of an updated AQF after a two-year review period, and 2013 saw the release of a second edition. A ten-level structure came into existence and brought the AQF closer to conformity with global standards. The updated AQF placed more emphasis on learning descriptor volume in addition to knowledge and skill descriptors and how they were applied across the ten qualification levels in progressively more complex ways.

Australia's international education standing is largely attributed to the AQF, which continues to be a crucial component of the country's framework for quality assurance in training and education. Australia's skill requirements have changed since the last revision due to innovations in international qualification frameworks and shifts in the nature of work. Along with pertinent regulatory frameworks, practices in education and training have also changed.

Keywords: Qualifications, Frameworks, Standards, Skills, Descriptors, Levels, Regulators

Introduction

Regulated qualifications are governed by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), the national policy in Australia. Students, businesses, and educators are all impacted by this. The AQF is agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). If the AQF recommends any changes, they must be approved by the COAG, Industry and Skills Council as well as the COAG Education Council.

The AQF provides an integrated policy that comprises:

- the learning outcomes for each AQF level and qualification type
- the specifications for the application of the AQF in the accreditation and development of qualifications
- the policy requirements for issuing AQF qualifications
- the policy requirements for qualification linkages and student pathways
- AQF qualifications and qualification pathways

¹Dr. Sudesh Kumar Garg, PhD (Education), University of Delhi, Lecturer, Trainer & Assessor, Nomi College, Perth, Australia.

- the policy requirements for the addition or removal of qualification types in the AQF, and the definitions of the terminology used in the policy.

The AQF unifies qualifications from senior secondary school, higher education, and vocational education and training (VET) into a single, national framework. It outlines the nature and goals of senior secondary education and has been crucial in maintaining the high standard of Australia's renowned tertiary education system. The AQF has been a model for the creation of qualifications frameworks worldwide and is used to facilitate the Australian qualifications be recognized in other nations.

Ten levels make up the AQF, and each level describes a learning result in terms of knowledge, skills, and applications at ever higher complexity levels. Within the 10-level framework, each sort of qualification—aside from the senior secondary certificate of education—has a designated level.

The AQF includes the following learning outcomes for each AQF level: knowledge, skills, and application of knowledge and skills.

- A volume of learning for each AQF qualification type, as well as learning goals (knowledge, skills, and the application of knowledge and skills);
- requirements for the bodies that create, accredit, and award each form of qualification;
- guidelines for the inclusion or deletion of AQF qualification types, AQF qualification paths, registries of accrediting and issuing organisations, policies for providing AQF qualifications, and guidelines for conforming with the qualifications frameworks of other nations; and
- clarifications that help in understanding how the AQF should be applied.

The Taxonomy of Learning Outcomes is Formed by the AQF Levels and Descriptions

The AQF's goals are comparable to those of numerous other certification frameworks worldwide. They will offer a modern, adaptable framework that:

- supports the development and upkeep of pathways that provide access to qualifications and help people move easily and readily between different education and training sectors and between those sectors and the labour market.
- supports lifelong learning goals of people by giving them the foundation to advance in their career through education and training and gain recognition for their prior learning and experiences.
- supports the diversity of purposes of Australian education and training now and in the future.
- contributes to national economic performance by supporting modern, relevant, and nationally consistent qualification outcomes that build confidence in qualifications.
- facilitates the alignment of the AQF with international qualifications frameworks.
- supports and enhances the mobility of graduates and workers both nationally and internationally by increasing recognition of the value and comparability of Australian qualifications.
- underpins national regulatory and quality assurance arrangements for education and training.

- Increases the value and comparability of Australian qualifications, which promotes and improves the mobility of workers and graduates both domestically and internationally. and
- It makes it possible for the AQF to be in line with global qualification systems.

Table 1 10 Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Levels

Higher Education	Vocational Education and Training	Secondary Schools	AQF Level
-	Certificate I	Senior Secondary Certificate of Education	
-	Certificate II		
-	Certificate III	-	
-	Certificate IV	-	
Diploma	Diploma	-	
Associate degree	Advanced Diploma	-	
Bachelor's degree	-	-	
Graduate Certificate	Graduate Certificate	-	
Graduate Diploma	Graduate Diploma		
Master's Degree	-	-	
Doctoral Degree	-	-	

AQF Evolution and Application

The AQF was created to encourage openness and connections throughout the various education sectors. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) replaced the Register of Australian Tertiary Education (RATE) when it was first introduced in 1995, drawing inspiration from the Australian Standards Framework (ASF). Part of the transition to competency-based training was the development of the ASF, a levelled vocational system. All qualifications from the RATE up to and including a bachelor's degree were transferred, while the first six AQF qualifications matched the first six ASF levels.

The AQF was developed in Australia due to a variety of circumstances. There was a demand for nationally recognized VET certificates connected to competency standards since the VET system was being changed to implement competency-based training. The number of Year 12 graduates was rising, and the tertiary education industry was expanding quickly. This demonstrated that to facilitate credit transfer and recognition of prior learning (RPL), there is a need for increased uniformity and openness across qualifications.

When the AQF was first established, it was a somewhat flexible structure. With learning outcome levels integrated into the certification types, it mirrored the features of the current qualification types given in each sector.

The credentials were categorised according to industry and included knowledge descriptions applicable to that industry. This contrasted with the uniform, level-based learning and skill taxonomies that other nations employ, which the AQF would start using in 2011.

The Goals of the AQF to Support the Development of A More Cohesive Tertiary System

Australia should create a more cohesive tertiary education system, according to the Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008). It suggested a single regulator and funding source for the VET and higher education sectors and acknowledged the necessity of a continuum of tertiary skills. Taking note of the AQF's shortcomings at the time, it also suggested reviewing the AQF. A stronger custodian of a stronger AQF was desired by stakeholders, leading to the establishment of the AQF Council, which oversaw the AQF Review between 2009 and 2011.

2011 saw the implementation of an updated AQF that included the elements listed as well as a more uniform classification of learning objectives. The AQF is now a more intricate and detailed document because the taxonomy was applied to both levels and qualifications.

These modifications envisioned improved governance structures for an AQF body to guarantee AQF compliance. However, distinct regulatory systems for higher education and VET have continued to develop under separate national regulators, in contrast to the more integrated tertiary education system that the Bradley Review recommended. While both sectors' provider standards refer to the AQF, it is possible that they also reinforce sector-specific variations in the goals, structures, and pedagogies of qualifications.

The patterns and advancements have curtailed the efficacy of the updated AQF in attaining enhanced coherence throughout Australia's higher education sector. Numerous reports indicate that the desire for a more cohesive tertiary sector has recently resurfaced. The AQF might offer more assistance for a more cohesive tertiary system, but to fully reap the benefits of the AQF, financing and governance structures would need to be reevaluated. A noteworthy and distinct advancement has been the continuous expansion of VET programs offered as part of senior secondary certifications.

The AQF is Frequently Used

The primary users of the AQF are those who create, issue, and accredit qualifications. Governments, unions, businesses, licensing authorities, and professional associations are among the other users. Students, especially those from overseas, can benefit from the AQF as it illustrates the connections between different types of qualifications in Australia, which can help with study selection.

Knowledge and Abilities are Becoming More and More Crucial

Current knowledge and abilities are more crucial to Australian economy and society than they have ever been. Individuals utilise them for employment, education, and social interactions. Knowledge and skills, when used effectively, can raise worker productivity. People with the knowledge and skills of today have better job security, income, and job satisfaction, all of which have an impact on quality of life. According to

the Department of Jobs and Small Business, most of the job growth over the next five years is expected to occur in fields that frequently require post-secondary education.

Both Experience and Qualifications are Helpful in Landing a Job

Qualifications demonstrate to potential employers and others what an individual is capable of and has accomplished. Education providers certify, by means of qualifications, that students have met or exceeded the necessary standard for learning outcomes. Graduates present their qualifications as proof of their accomplishments and as a means of pursuing career advancement; employers and the public view them as markers of success and potential.

Certifications may have economic, or exchange value related to job outcomes associated with the qualification, in addition to intrinsic value derived from the standing of the education provider. Although qualifications are a weaker indicator of initial job competence, employers believe that they demonstrate a greater capacity for learning and skill acquisition.

Academic credentials are not the only indicator of success; experience is needed for about two thirds of open positions. Most of the job growth over the past five years has been in positions that typically call for post-secondary education. Although certain jobs requiring lower AQF level qualifications can also attract high pay, people with higher AQF level qualifications (degree or above) tend to have higher employment rates and earn more. Employers may choose between job applicants based on their qualifications.

The Nature of Labour is Evolving

Australian working environment is changing due to globalisation, technology, and demographic changes. The AQF has adapted to these changes in the workforce because they will impact the knowledge and skills that graduates need as well as the methods used by providers to deliver education. Less manual labour and routine jobs are being created by technological advancement, which is also propelling the growth of professional and technical fields and the shift from physical skills to interpersonal, while raising the need for social workers' and healthcare providers' professional and interpersonal skills. Increased competition from skilled workers abroad results from globalisation and a more mobile labour market, which puts pressure on Australian businesses' labour costs and supply chains.

Indigenous and regional populations are being impacted by population shifts and competition for limited resources brought about by globalisation. There is typically a greater percentage of elderly residents in regional areas. The percentage of older people in regional areas is rising because of young adults from other areas relocating to large cities for work, education, other opportunities, and enhancing creative, and decision-making skills.

Raising educational attainment levels is essential to addressing disadvantaged communities and promoting effective social and economic participation. People are more likely to have multiple jobs or careers as more tasks become automated and some relocate overseas. Through a flexible, industry-responsive process of lifelong learning, people will need to retrain, upskill, and maintain their skills in their respective industry workplace.

The AQF Do Need to Acknowledge Fresh Competencies and Pedagogies

Learners will need to master new material and take advantage of new learning opportunities as the nature of work changes and demands new knowledge and skills.

Professional, technical, interpersonal, and creative skills are in greater demand, as was already mentioned. They are referred to as social and enterprise skills. Social and enterprise skills are applicable to all job roles. These include the ability to work with people, deal with data and technology, and adapt to change. It is imperative that all adolescents and adults who are returning to school be given the chance to develop the competencies needed for the workforce of the future.

People want faster, less expensive, self-directed, and on-demand learning because changes in the workplace may necessitate more reskilling or upskilling. Employers favour shorter, more focused courses of study and training, but only as an addition to a full qualification such as a Bachelor's degree or a Certificate III.

Innovative Techniques for Instruction and Learning

Modifications in technology are also affecting how education is imparted and learned. In order to prepare for the skills required in the workforce of the future, the Ai Group has predicted the need for new learning experiences to be delivered more quickly, more affordably, and on demand. Massive Open Online Courses and other forms of online education are already being used more frequently, and digital badges and micro-credentials are becoming more and more well-liked.

Online learning is becoming more and more popular because, in comparison to in-person instruction, it can be either free (not including certification of acquired skills and knowledge) or less expensive (including certification of acquired skills and knowledge). Those who are working, have caring responsibilities, or are geographically distant, or who want to undertake a course at a speed that suits them.

There seems to be a growing need for quick courses and micro-credentials. This is because they are brief, just-in-time, and appropriate for upskilling employees in response to shifting market demands, all of which may improve job security. Shorter learning courses are also appropriate for those who want to gradually expand their knowledge and skill set throughout their professional lives (lifelong learning). Formal qualifications could be created by combining these credentials.

Upskilling versus Reskilling

Upskilling is giving employees new abilities to improve their current roles by teaching them new skills. On the other hand, reskilling comprises teaching people for different roles or learning new skills to enable them to move into a different line of work. Employers must use both strategies to successfully address the projected skills shortage.

People with “adjacent skills,” or those that are closely related to the new skills the employer needs, are the target audience for reskilling. It provides a lateral learning experience, which is necessary to satisfy the

labour market's extensive reskilling requirements. According to estimates from the World Economic Forum, technological advancements will require reskilling for half of all employees by 2025.

In contrast, giving workers advanced skills closes the talent gap and promotes an upskilling culture. This strategy places a strong emphasis on lifelong learning, allowing staff members to advance along their current career path. Organisations are employing a variety of tactics to upskill their workforce, and one such tactic is employee development through gamification platforms. Investing in the professional development of employees increases retention rates while also fostering loyalty. Most of employees would prefer to stay longer with organisations that actively support their professional development.

Financial limitations and insufficient technology impede the implementation of workforce development programmes, even though many organisations acknowledge their significance in mitigating the skills gap. But waiting time to gain competencies will make it more difficult for businesses to meet long-term objectives if the required skills are not readily available.

Social and Entrepreneurial Abilities

The need for social and enterprise skills is rising. Along with their discipline or vocational based skills, graduates are strongly encouraged to acquire these skills. The AQF looks after how to mention or incorporate enterprise and social skills in the qualification's domain. Depending on the qualification's intended use, these skills should be included in the AQF or represented in specific qualifications.

Numerous Entrepreneurship and Social Skills

The proposed VET training product reforms acknowledge the growing demand from employers for workers possessing a broad range of skills. Three categories of skills are suggested as being required for VET graduates in proposed training product reforms. These include future work skills, technical skills, and fundamental skills like literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy. Comparably, research students will benefit from courses in leadership and communication offered by the Australian Technology Network universities, which will help them become more employable.

Many social and enterprise skills are not brand-new, and there is no approved list of them. It shows how social, and enterprise skills can encompass interpersonal abilities like empathy, creativity, and communication as well as moral principles and behaviours like responsibility, integrity, teamwork, and resilience. They also include the abilities required to utilise technology and reap its benefits.

Context Determines How Business and Social Skills are Applied

The application of social and enterprise skills will vary depending on the discipline or vocational field (context) in which they are used, even with a more comprehensive list. Effective problem-solving techniques utilised by a preschool teacher to get past the typical difficulties of running a preschool could be very different from those employed by a mining engineer to address an uncontrollably burning oil rig.

As it stands, the AQF implies that the use of social and enterprise skills is limited to the education and training industry. Nonetheless, a lot of jobs cross these sectors, and people advance through them. This

implies that the sector in which social and enterprise skills are provided has less bearing on them than does their relationship to degrees in related fields of study. Furthermore, it is probably not possible to teach and evaluate enterprise and social skills at different levels and to present them in a taxonomy that is applicable to all qualifications because they seem to be context dependent.

Applying enterprise and social skills would therefore seem to warrant changing the AQF reference to sector dependence. It might be replaced with instructions on how particular social and enterprise skills could be used in various qualifications, considering the discipline and goal of the qualification as well as the main learner cohort for which it is meant. The range of social and enterprise skills would need to be updated and reviewed on a regular basis under this approach.

Summary

According to preliminary deliberations, many people view the AQF as a ladder where higher education credentials are at the top and VET qualifications are at the bottom. This suggests an implicit hierarchy that favours higher education over VET.

These perceptions are unrelated to the vocational nature of the qualification, since vocational qualifications are offered in both the VET and higher education sectors. Considering that qualifications frameworks are based on a taxonomy of increasing levels of skills and knowledge as well as the application of skills and knowledge, it is challenging to overcome the perception of a hierarchy of qualification types in the AQF.

Views of prestige between the VET and higher education sectors in Australia and many other countries also mirror broader social and cultural attitudes. Over the past ten years, funding and policy disparities between the sectors may have impacted Australia. Contrary to what some have claimed, these perceptions are unlikely to be affected by simple presentational or even design changes in the AQF.

Qualifications developers oversee determining the standard at which qualifications are established. Similarly, it is the duty of the parties to the award, occupational regulators, and professional bodies, to link qualifications to occupations through industrial awards for occupational licensing or professional certification.

As was previously mentioned, the process of matching qualifications to levels may be limited and may reflect broader social and cultural attitudes regarding these qualifications if the AQF taxonomy does not fairly represent the degree of autonomy and responsibility of some VET sector qualifications.

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