

Graduate and Vocational Graduate Certificates and Diplomas in the AQF: IRU response

The AQF Council's proposed solution to the future of the graduate certificate and graduate diploma qualifications is to:

- abolish the Graduate Certificate as an AQF sanctioned qualification;
- redefine the Graduate Diploma as level 7, a free standing qualification which would be an alternative to a bachelor degree as a pathway to level 8 and beyond; and
- create an Advanced Graduate Diploma, level 8, very similar to the many current Graduate Diplomas.

In these comments the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) focuses on the AQF Council's quite significant statements about the nature of qualifications as defined through the AQF and the role which the Council should take in developing the AQF.

IRU members and other university groups including Universities Australia have provided more detailed comments concerning the significant problems with the proposal in the Paper. The IRU supports and endorses the UA response.

In summary the IRU:

- rejects the removal of the Graduate Certificate, both in name and nature, from the AQF;
- argues against making level 7 qualifications of less volume than a Bachelor degree a sufficient entry qualification for level 8 and above qualifications;
- does not consider the arguments for the nomenclature and meaning of Graduate Diploma and Advanced Graduate Diploma to distinguish level 7 and 8 are sufficient to replace the sector preferred terms of Graduate and Postgraduate reflecting the distinction between acquiring a new area of knowledge and the deepening of an existing area of knowledge; and
- supports removal of the rarely used Vocational Graduate qualifications.

The relationship between the qualifications framework and higher education provision

The initial Australian Qualifications Framework largely described the then set of qualifications in common use as a basis for improving consistency of expectations from a qualification title. The need for improvement was strong among many of the vocational qualifications and among the suite of minor higher education qualifications. The bachelor degree and research degrees were barely affected.

In time the AQF became a reference point that drove practice as much as it sought to describe practice. This provided a useful balance, and sometimes tension, between supporting development of qualifications in response to educational, professional and employment needs and ensuring a degree of coherence to what qualifications were being offered and the titles used.

The original model was qualification specific. The current AQF is based around levels. It defines the expectations for a qualification at a level but explicitly permit more than one qualification type at a level, one point of difference being the volume, or extent of work required, for the qualification. Hence it should be easier to add and subtract qualifications from the AQF in response to changing needs, with removal of a qualification to follow its obsolescence as shown through lack of use.

A levels framework should also give universities and other providers the space to develop the qualifications they provide, both changing existing types and creating new, while remaining within the broad framework. If universities and other providers do not have the opportunity to do this the effect is to freeze the AQF at a point of transitory perfection that will increasingly be in conflict with good practice. An effective AQF needs to both act to ensure coherence in qualifications usage and be dynamic in encouraging and recognising future change.

The Graduate Certificate

The current proposals take the AQF Council's role another step by proposing to prevent further use of a coherent, nationally used, qualification - the Graduate Certificate. It targets a qualification that has increased substantially in use from 6648 completions in 1999 to 16406 in 2011 (DEEWR *Award Course Completions 2011*, Table 1). The AQF Council now considers the qualification superfluous.

On p4 (5th para under Rationale) the AQF Council paper argues that the Graduate Certificate is not sufficiently robust as a stand-alone qualification. It states that the AQF 7 plus level requires an extent of volume to be valid. This goes against the arguments for levels - that different volumes can distinguish qualifications at the same level. Without volume distinctions it becomes very hard to see how multiple qualifications can be sustained at any one level. This may be why the levels based AQF largely remains a hierarchy of qualification names, not qualifications within a levels framework.

The IRU and other sector responses to the November 2011 AQF Council discussion paper argued that the Graduate degrees would be more clearly defined if grouped into *Graduate* Certificates and Diplomas and *Postgraduate* Certificates and Diplomas at levels 7 and 8 respectively. At level 7 Graduate Certificates and Diplomas would be in line with the Bachelor Degree, with student cohorts at this level being introduced to a new body of knowledge. The level would be the same but the extent different. At level 8 students studying a Postgraduate qualification will be deepening their expertise in an existing knowledge area. The proposal is both based on the current and planned practice and serves to clarify practice for students and other interested parties.

The AQF Council rejects this proposal because it 'appeared to be based on current institutional practices inconsistent with the revised AQF' (p3). So where once the AQF described, and ensured there was a coherent frame for, what was being done, now practice is considered a negative as a basis for determining what should be endorsed. Taken seriously the argument would require future changes to be based on a theoretic conceptualization of an option, approval of it prior to any use, and only then a test of whether it works in practice. The argument is hostile to the capacity for universities and other providers to lead change through practical development.

Implications from removing the Graduate Certificate

Most if not all universities offer Graduate Certificates, as do other higher education providers. Should it be removed from the AQF universities will likely continue to offer the qualification as a non-AQF award, as they have power to do. Providers without self-accrediting powers will not be able to do so if TEQSA only accredits against AQF qualifications.

Hence, against a policy setting to integrate universities into the national quality framework and to even the basis of operation between universities and other providers the effect of the AQFC proposal is to force universities to offer a significant qualification outside of the AQF and to make this an option only available to self-accrediting institutions.

The importance of volume: Pathways and end points

The proposal for the reminted Graduate Diploma at level 7 permits it to be the basis for subsequent entry to level 8 and beyond qualifications. Currently, as set out in the framework and in practice, entry to qualifications at level 8 and beyond rests on completion of a level 7 bachelor degree or a

combination of other qualifications and relevant work experience. This provides both a clear marker – the bachelor degree – and the flexibility to respond to individuals capable of higher level study.

Creating a Graduate Diploma that is a level 7 qualification taken in its own right rather than following a bachelor degree in some ways restores the role long ago of the two year diploma (now relegated to level 6). It may be an option of interest to some providers, particularly those operating across VET and higher education who struggle to enrol students in the higher level VET qualifications. As argued above if there is a rationale for such a qualification then the Framework should be sufficiently flexible to allow providers to develop it. However, it should be an addition to the Framework, and not involve altering the common understanding of the Graduate Diploma term.

Nor should it create an alternative route to higher level qualifications. The issue is the relationship of qualifications of different volume but the same level to subsequent studies. The AQF has played an important role in encouraging pathways on to higher or different qualifications by setting out the expected linkages. However, it is not necessary that every qualification serve such a purpose. Some are better considered an end point, providing education suited to the level but are not in themselves a sufficient basis for entry to a higher level qualification.

As the various examples presented by universities in their submissions show, the proposal allows people to acquire higher level qualifications with notably different levels of previous study, creating less not more coherence to higher education provision. Rather the Bachelor degree should be the hinge in the classification of higher education qualifications system that provides a pathway to Level 8 to 10 qualifications.

IRU Recommendations:

1. That the Graduate Certificate be retained in the AQF
2. That level 7 qualifications of less volume than a Bachelor degree are not stated to be a sufficient entry qualification for level 8 and above qualifications
3. That the nomenclature of Graduate and Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma be used to describe the level 7 and 8 qualifications respectively reflecting the distinction between acquiring a new area of knowledge and the deepening of an existing area of knowledge
4. That the rarely used Vocational Graduate qualifications can be removed from the AQF

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