

# An Overview of the Australian Qualifications Framework

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) provides a comprehensive, nationally consistent yet flexible framework for all qualifications in post-compulsory education and training. The Framework was introduced Australia-wide on 1 January 1995.

The AQF recognises that the schools sector, vocational education and training sector and higher education sector each have different industry and institutional linkages. It connects these in a coherent single Framework incorporating qualification **titles** and **guidelines**.

The AQF now comprises fifteen qualifications. These fifteen qualifications are shown below, grouped according to the sector with authority for setting the standards of each qualification. It should be noted that:

- there is rapidly increasing provision of vocational education and training in the schools sector, which may be recognised at the appropriate Certificate I–IV level and contribute towards a Senior Secondary Certificate of Education;
- some Certificate I–IV qualifications are issued by the higher education institutions approved as Registered Training Organisations (RTOs); and
- some higher education qualifications, such as Associate Degrees and Bachelor Degrees, are issued by vocational education and training institutions approved to provide higher education qualifications.

**Table 1: Qualifications According to Sector**  
**AQF Qualification by Sector of Accreditation**

Schools Sector Accreditation	Vocational Education and Training Sector Accreditation	Higher Education Sector Accreditation
Senior Secondary Certificate of Education	Vocational Graduate Diploma	Doctoral Degree
	Vocational Graduate Certificate	Masters Degree
	Advanced Diploma	Graduate Diploma
	Diploma	Graduate Certificate
	Certificate IV	Bachelor Degree
	Certificate III	Associate Degree, Advanced Diploma
	Certificate II	Diploma
	Certificate I	

It should be also noted that there are no standardised rankings or equivalences between different qualifications issued in different sectors, as these qualifications recognise different types of learning reflecting the distinctive educational responsibilities of each sector. Where the same qualifications are issued in more than one sector but authorised differently by each sector (ie Diploma, Advanced Diploma) they are equivalent qualifications, although sector-differentiated.

The Guidelines contain the main criteria for defining qualifications based on the general characteristics of education and training at each qualification level. These characteristics are expressed principally as learning outcomes. The Guidelines provide common ground for qualifications across the sectors. Differences in approach between the sectors are, in the main, related to the area of authority for learning outcomes, and these are reflected in the Guidelines.

To enable effective implementation, the Framework is supported by:

- Guidelines for Cross-Sector Qualification Linkages and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL);
- Principles for the issuance of qualifications and protection of titles, which include provision for the issuance of a Statement of Attainment which is issued by a Registered Training Organisation when an individual has completed one or more units of competency from nationally recognised qualification(s)/course(s); and
- Arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the Framework, through the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board.

The AQF:

- provides nationally consistent recognition of outcomes achieved in post-compulsory education;
- helps with developing flexible pathways which assist people to move more easily between the education and training sectors and between those sectors and the labour market by providing the basis for recognition of prior learning, including credit transfer and experience;
- integrates and streamlines the requirements of participating providers, employers and employees, individuals and interested organisations;
- offers flexibility to suit the diversity of purposes of education and training;
- encourages individuals to progress through education and training by improving access to qualifications, clearly defining avenues for achievement, and generally contributing to lifelong learning;
- encourages the provision of more and higher quality vocational education and training through qualifications that meet individual, workplace and vocational needs, thus contributing to national economic performance; and
- promotes national and international recognition of qualifications offered in Australia.

# Guidelines

The Guidelines have been developed to assist employers; employees; professional associations; unions; Training Package, course and curriculum developers; accrediting bodies; and the wider public, including students, parents, and education and training bodies, to understand factors defining a qualification available under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

The introduction of the National Skills Framework represented a landmark decision by the Australian, State and Territory governments to simplify the vocational education and training system and to reduce the points of regulation. This decision has a number of implications for the AQF.

The National Skills Framework is made up of two elements: the Australian Quality Training Framework and Training Packages.

The Australian Quality Training Framework 2007 (AQTF 2007) is a set of nationally agreed standards to ensure the quality of vocational education and training services throughout Australia. States and Territories apply the AQTF 2007 when:

- registering organisations to deliver training, assess competency and issue AQF qualifications;
- auditing Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to ensure they meet (and continue to meet) the requirements of the AQTF;
- applying mutual recognition of qualifications and Statements of Attainment; and
- accrediting courses.

The AQTF ensures that all RTOs and the qualifications they issue are recognised throughout Australia. The AQTF 2007 includes two sets of standards:

- ***Essential Standards for Registration;*** and
- ***Standards for State and Territory Registering Bodies.***

Training Packages are sets of nationally endorsed standards and qualifications for recognising and assessing people's skills.

A Training Package describes the skills and knowledge needed to perform effectively in the workplace. They do not prescribe how an individual should be trained. Teachers and trainers develop learning strategies depending on learners' needs, abilities and circumstances.

Training Packages are developed by industry through national Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) and other recognised bodies including relevant enterprises to meet the identified training needs of specific industries or industry sectors. To gain national endorsement, developers must provide evidence of extensive consultation and support within the industry area or enterprise.

Training Packages complete a quality assurance process and are then endorsed by the National Quality Council (NQC). The responsible Ministers then agree to place the Training Package on the National

Training Information Service (NTIS). Endorsed Training Packages are subject to periodic review.

The Guidelines specify the characteristics of learning outcomes as well as explaining the responsibilities for assessment, issuance and certification. They are set out in a common format to enable comparisons and assist in distinguishing between qualifications. This common format covers the following areas:

### **Purpose**

The aim of the Guideline.

### **Context**

Why the Guideline is necessary.

### **Learning Outcomes**

#### **Authority**

The ultimate determinants of the qualification.

#### **Characteristics**

A descriptor of learning outcomes or competencies to be achieved for this particular qualification.

#### **Distinguishing Features**

The features that distinguish adjacent qualifications.

### **Responsibility for Assessment**

Who is ultimately responsible for assessment.

### **Pathways to the Qualification**

How the qualification can be achieved.

### **Authority to Issue the Qualification**

Who issues the qualification.

### **Certification Issued**

When the qualification is issued and what is issued.



# Summary Tables of Qualifications: Key Features of Each Qualification

**Table 2: Authority for Learning Outcomes**

<p><b>Senior Secondary Certificate of Education</b></p>	<p>At a State/Territory level, requirements for Senior Secondary Certificates of Education are set by Statutory Boards which are responsible for the development and accreditation of courses of study, assessment, issuance of the qualification and associated quality assurance and consultative processes.</p>
<p><b>Certificate I</b> <b>Certificate II</b> <b>Certificate III</b> <b>Certificate IV</b></p>	<p>In the <b>vocational education and training sector</b>, qualifications are based on nationally endorsed competency standards where they exist or on competency standards developed by relevant industry, enterprise, community or professional groups. The qualifications certify achievement of learning outcomes generally identified as sets of competencies for levels of workplace performance reflected in the characteristics and distinguishing features of each qualification. The focus in the vocational education and training sector is on the capacity to directly assess the performance criteria in the competencies specified within the Training Package or accredited course.</p> <p>Authorisation of alignment of competency standards to AQF qualifications occurs as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National Industry Skills Councils and other recognised bodies including relevant enterprises, through the process of developing Training Packages, determine the relevant qualification for each set of national competency standards in their respective Training Packages. This determination is subject to endorsement by the National Quality Council.</li> <li>• State/Territory Course Accrediting Bodies, or Registered Training Organisations with delegated authority to self-manage accreditation, through the course accreditation process determine the relevant qualifications for any combined sets of national competency standards for which there is a training need, derived either from more than one Training Package and/or other endorsed sets of competency standards. The title of the new qualification must be clearly distinct from those in the related Training Packages.</li> <li>• Where there is no relevant Training Package, State/Territory Course Accrediting Bodies, through the course accreditation process, determine the relevant qualification for other sets of competency standards developed by relevant industry, enterprise, community or professional bodies to meet an identified training need.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Diploma</b> <b>Advanced Diploma</b> <b>Vocational Graduate Certificate</b> <b>Vocational Graduate Diploma</b></p>	<p>In the <b>vocational education and training sector</b>, qualifications are based on nationally endorsed competency standards where they exist or on competency standards developed by relevant industry, enterprise, community or professional groups. The qualifications certify achievement of learning outcomes generally identified as sets of competencies for levels of workplace performance reflected in the characteristics and distinguishing features of each qualification. The focus in the vocational education and training sector is on the capacity to directly assess the performance criteria in the competencies specified within the Training Package or accredited course.</p>

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<p><b>Associate Degree</b>  <b>Bachelor Degree</b>  <b>Graduate Certificate</b>  <b>Graduate Diploma</b>  <b>Masters Degree</b>  <b>Doctoral Degree</b></p>	<p>In the <b>higher education sector</b>, objectives and academic requirements of courses are set by higher education institutions having regard for requirements set by peer review and the requirements of relevant professional bodies and employer groups. They may establish course advisory committees comprising a range of interested parties including practitioners, employers, community representatives and academic staff from other institutions to facilitate ongoing review of content and relevance. Universities and other self-accrediting institutions are authorised to accredit their own courses. Non self-accrediting institutions must have their courses approved by government accreditation authorities through processes which ensure that the courses are comparable in requirements and learning outcomes to a course at the same level in a similar field at an Australian university.</p>

**Table 3: Characteristics of Learning Outcomes**

Senior Secondary Certificate of Education	Certificate I	Certificate II	Certificate III	Certificate IV
<p>The characteristics of learning outcomes at this level include the knowledge, skills and understandings, both generic and subject-specific, required as a basic preparation for civic life, work and lifelong learning. These are developed through studies that may include academic disciplines, vocational education and training, and community-based learning.</p>	<p>Breadth, depth and complexity of knowledge and skills would prepare a person to perform a defined range of activities most of which may be routine and predictable. Applications may include a variety of employment-related skills including preparatory access and participation skills, broad-based induction skills and/or specific workplace skills. They may also include participation in a team or work group.</p>	<p>Breadth, depth and complexity of knowledge and skills would prepare a person to perform in a range of varied activities or knowledge application where there is a clearly defined range of contexts in which the choice of actions required is usually clear and there is limited complexity in the range of options to be applied. Performance of a prescribed range of functions involving known routines and procedures and some accountability for the quality of outcomes. Applications may include some complex or non-routine activities involving individual responsibility or autonomy and/or collaboration with others as part of a group or team.</p>	<p>Breadth, depth and complexity of knowledge and competencies would cover selecting, adapting and transferring skills and knowledge to new environments and providing technical advice and some leadership in resolution of specific problems. This would be applied across a range of roles in a variety of contexts with some complexity in the extent and choice of options available. Performance of a defined range of skilled operations, usually within a range of broader related activities involving known routines, methods and procedures, where some discretion and judgement is required in the selection of equipment, services or contingency measures and within known time constraints. Applications may involve some responsibility for others. Participation in teams including group or team coordination may be involved.</p>	<p>Breadth, depth and complexity of knowledge and competencies would cover a broad range of varied activities or application in a wider variety of contexts most of which are complex and non-routine. Leadership and guidance are involved when organising activities of self and others as well as contributing to technical solutions of a non-routine or contingency nature. Performance of a broad range of skilled applications including requirements to evaluate and analyse current practices, develop new criteria and procedures for performing current practices and provision of some leadership and guidance to others in the application and planning of the skills. Applications involve responsibility for, and limited organisation of, others.</p>

**Diploma**

Breadth, depth and complexity covering planning and initiation of alternative approaches to skills or knowledge applications across a broad range of technical and/or management requirements, evaluation and coordination.

The self-directed application of knowledge and skills, with substantial depth in some areas where judgement is required in planning and selecting appropriate equipment, services and techniques for self and others.

Applications involve participation in development of strategic initiatives, as well as personal responsibility and autonomy in performing complex technical operations or organising others. It may include participation in teams including teams concerned with planning and evaluation functions. Group or team coordination may be involved.

The degree of emphasis on breadth as against depth of knowledge and skills may vary between qualifications granted at this level.

**Advanced Diploma**

Breadth, depth and complexity involving analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and evaluation across a broad range of technical and/or management functions including development of new criteria or applications or knowledge or procedures.

The application of a significant range of fundamental principles and complex techniques across a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts in relation to either varied or highly specific functions.

Contribution to the development of a broad plan, budget or strategy is involved and accountability and responsibility for self and others in achieving the outcomes is involved.

Applications involve significant judgement in planning, design, technical or leadership/guidance functions related to products, services, operations or procedures.

The degree of emphasis on breadth as against depth of knowledge and skills may vary between qualifications granted at this level.

**Associate Degree**

The acquisition of the foundational underpinnings of one or more disciplines, including understanding and interpretation of key concepts and theories and how they are evolving within the relevant scientific, technical, social and cultural contexts.

Development of the academic skills and attributes necessary to access, comprehend and evaluate information from a range of sources.

Development of generic employment related skills relevant to a range of employment contexts.

A capacity for self-directed and lifelong learning.

A course leading to this qualification is generally but not exclusively articulated with relevant Bachelor Degree programs.

A course leading to this qualification will vary in breadth and depth according to whether it is a single or multidisciplinary program but will be taken to sufficient depth to provide a basis for full articulation with relevant Bachelor Degree programs.

**Bachelor Degree**

The acquisition of a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, the underlying principles and concepts, and the associated communication and problem-solving skills.

Development of the academic skills and attributes necessary to undertake research, comprehend and evaluate new information, concepts and evidence from a range of sources.

Development of the ability to review, consolidate, extend and apply the knowledge and techniques learnt, including in a professional context.

A foundation for self-directed and lifelong learning.

Interpersonal and teamwork skills appropriate to employment and/or further study.

A course leading to this qualification also usually involves major studies in which significant literature is available. Course content is taken to a significant depth and progressively developed to a high level which provides a basis for postgraduate study and professional careers.

**Graduate Certificate**

Characteristics of learning outcomes at this level cover a wide range of specialised needs following an undergraduate program or relevant prior work, ranging from initial and ongoing professional development to preparation for further postgraduate study. The learning outcomes reflect a standard appropriate to advanced study and primarily include the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills in a new discipline or professional area, which may also involve extending knowledge and skills gained in an undergraduate program or relevant prior work.

**Table 3: Characteristics of Learning Outcomes – continued**

Vocational Graduate Certificate	Graduate Diploma	Vocational Graduate Diploma	Masters Degree	Doctoral Degree
<p>The self-directed development and achievement of broad and/or specialised areas of knowledge and skills building on prior knowledge and skills. Substantial breadth, depth and complexity involving the initiation, analysis, design, planning, execution and evaluation of technical and/or management functions in highly varied and /or highly specialised contexts. Applications involve making significant, high level, independent judgements in major, broad or specialised planning, design, operational, technical and/or management functions in highly varied and/or highly specialised contexts. It may include responsibility and broad-ranging accountability for the structure, management and output of the work of others and/or functions. The degree of emphasis on breadth as against depth of knowledge and skills may vary between qualifications granted at this level.</p>	<p>Characteristics of learning outcomes at this level cover a wide range of specialised needs following an undergraduate or postgraduate program or relevant prior work, ranging from initial and ongoing professional development to preparation for further postgraduate study, including research higher degrees. The learning outcomes reflect a standard appropriate to a graduate intake and may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the acquisition and critical application of knowledge and skills in a new discipline or professional area, which may also involve extending knowledge and skills already gained in an undergraduate program or relevant prior work; and</li> <li>• further specialisation within a systematic and coherent body of knowledge.</li> </ul>	<p>The self-directed development and achievement of broad and/or specialised areas of knowledge and skills building on prior knowledge and skills. Substantial breadth, depth and complexity involving the initiation, analysis, design, planning, execution and evaluation of major functions, both broad and/or highly specialised, in highly varied and/or highly specialised contexts. Further specialisation within a systematic and coherent body of knowledge. Applications involving making high level, fully independent, complex judgements in broad and/or highly specialised planning, design, operational, technical and/or management functions in highly varied and/or highly specialised contexts. They may involve full responsibility and accountability for all aspects of work of others and functions including planning, budgeting and strategy.</p>	<p>Mastery or overview of the relevant field of study or area of professional practice and the emphasis may range from the acquisition or enhancement of specific professional or vocational skills and knowledge, usually undertaken in a combination of coursework and research, through to the acquisition of in-depth understanding in a specific area of knowledge which is usually undertaken through research. Provide appropriate evidence of advanced knowledge about a specialist body of theoretical and applied topics. Demonstrate a high order of skill in analysis, critical evaluation and/or professional application through the planning and execution of project work or a piece of scholarship or research. Demonstrate creativity and flexibility in the application of knowledge and skills to new situations, to solve complex problems and to think rigorously and independently.</p>	<p>A substantial original contribution to knowledge in the form of new knowledge or significant and original adaptation, application and interpretation of existing knowledge. A comprehensive and searching review of the literature, experimentation, creative work with exegesis or other systematic approach or an advanced, searching and expansive critical reflection on professional theory and practice. Undertake an original research project, or a project(s) addressing a matter of substance concerning practice in a profession at a high level of originality and quality. Presentation of a substantial and well ordered dissertation, non-print thesis or portfolio, for submission to external examination against international standards.</p>

**Table 4: Distinguishing Features of Learning Outcomes**

Certificate I	Certificate II	Certificate III	Certificate IV
<b>Do the Competencies enable an individual with this qualification to:</b>	<b>Do the Competencies enable an individual with this qualification to:</b>	<b>Do the Competencies enable an individual with this qualification to:</b>	<b>Do the Competencies enable an individual with this qualification to:</b>
demonstrate knowledge by recall in a narrow range of areas	demonstrate basic operational knowledge in a moderate range of areas	demonstrate some relevant theoretical knowledge	demonstrate understanding of a broad knowledge base incorporating some theoretical concepts
demonstrate basic practical skills such as the use of relevant tools	apply a defined range of skills	apply a range of well developed skills	apply solutions to a defined range of unpredictable problems
	apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems	apply known solutions to a variety of predictable problems	
perform a sequence of routine tasks given clear direction	perform a range of tasks where choice between a limited range of options is required	perform processes that require a range of well developed skills where some discretion and judgement is required	identify and apply skill and knowledge areas to a wide variety of contexts with depth in some areas
receive and pass on messages/information	assess and record information from varied sources	interpret available information, using discretion and judgement	identify, analyse and evaluate information from a variety of sources
	take limited responsibility for own outputs in work and learning	take responsibility for own outputs in work and learning	take responsibility for own outputs in relation to specified quality standards
		take limited responsibility for the output of others	take limited responsibility for the quantity and quality of the output of others

**Table 4: Distinguishing Features of Learning Outcomes – continued**

Diploma	Advanced Diploma	Vocational Graduate Certificate	Vocational Graduate Diploma
<p><b>Do the Competencies or Learning Outcomes enable an individual with this qualification to:</b></p> <p>demonstrate understanding of a broad knowledge base incorporating theoretical concepts, with substantial depth in some areas</p> <p>analyse and plan approaches to technical problems or management requirements</p> <p>transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of situations</p> <p>evaluate information using it to forecast for planning or research purposes</p> <p>take responsibility for own outputs in relation to broad quantity and quality parameters</p> <p>take limited responsibility for the achievement of group outcomes</p>	<p><b>Do the Competencies or Learning Outcomes enable an individual with this qualification to:</b></p> <p>demonstrate understanding of specialised knowledge with depth in some areas</p> <p>analyse, diagnose, design and execute judgements across a broad range of technical or management functions</p> <p>demonstrate a command of wide-ranging, highly specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills</p> <p>generate ideas through the analysis of information and concepts at an abstract level</p> <p>demonstrate accountability for personal outputs within broad parameters</p> <p>demonstrate accountability for group outcomes within broad parameters</p>	<p><b>Do the Competencies or Learning Outcomes enable an individual with this qualification to:</b></p> <p>demonstrate the self-directed development and achievement of broad and/or specialised areas of knowledge and skills building on prior knowledge and skills</p> <p>initiate, analyse, design, plan, execute and evaluate major, broad and/or highly specialised technical and/or management functions in highly varied and/or highly specialised contexts</p> <p>generate and evaluate ideas through the analysis of information and concepts at an abstract level</p> <p>demonstrate a command of wide-ranging highly specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills in complex contexts</p> <p>demonstrate responsibility and broad-ranging accountability for personal outputs</p> <p>demonstrate responsibility and broad-ranging accountability for the structure, management and output of work of others and/or functions</p>	<p><b>Do the Competencies or Learning Outcomes enable an individual with this qualification to:</b></p> <p>demonstrate the self-directed development and achievement of broad and/or highly specialised areas of knowledge and skills building on prior knowledge and skills</p> <p>initiate, analyse, design, plan, execute and evaluate major functions either broad and/or highly specialised within highly varied and/or highly specialised contexts</p> <p>generate and evaluate complex ideas through the analysis of information and concepts at an abstract level</p> <p>demonstrate an expert command of wide-ranging, highly specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills in complex and/or highly specialised or varied contexts</p> <p>demonstrate full responsibility and accountability for personal outputs</p> <p>demonstrate full responsibility and accountability for all aspects of work of others and functions including planning, budgeting and strategy</p>