

'Radical' idea behind Noonan Australian Qualifications Framework review

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There is a “quite radical” idea at the heart of the reforms to the Australian Qualifications Framework proposed in the recent review, says Peter Noonan, Victoria University’s professor of tertiary education policy, who chaired the review panel that reported in October.

He says the review panel went back to first principles and rethought the assumptions behind the AQF — which is essentially a taxonomy of the accredited education available in Australia’s post-school sector.

The current AQF takes the approach of dividing post-secondary education into 10 levels, ranging from basic vocational courses up to PhDs. To each level it assigns a standard of knowledge and skill, which learners are expected to achieve. And it carries with it the premise that learning is a ladder that learners will climb, with higher rungs representing more complex and difficult learning than lower rungs.

It is this approach the Noonan review has rethought. For example, Professor Noonan said in an interview with *The Australian*, “if you took the average tradesperson, they could well be working with a greater degree of authority, autonomy and ability than, say, a law graduate”.

But the current AQF does not allow for this possibility. It has the in-built assumption that a university graduate operates at a higher level of skill than a vocational course graduate, which has the effect of devaluing the skills of people with vocational qualifications.

To address this problem, the review panel suggests decoupling the hand-in-glove relationship between knowledge and skills.

In its report, it recommends compressing the current 10-level structure into eight bands representing complexity of knowledge and six bands representing skills.

And then there is a third category, which the panel has called “application”, which recognises that there are different ways learners can demonstrate they have acquired the knowledge and skills offered by their course.

“It’s a major conceptual change,” Professor Noonan says.

He believes it is important that the AQF should focus on the characteristics of the qualifications themselves, and not on the level at which the qualification happens to be.

The fact the new system has a richer way of describing any given qualification — its “knowledge” band, its “skill” band and its application — offers a much more flexible way to design degrees. Currently, as Professor Noonan points out, a master in physiotherapy notionally has the same learning outcomes as a master of robotics, even though, in reality, they are quite different.

“What we’re saying is the learning outcomes need to be much more reflective of the content and purpose and outcomes from individual qualifications ... and reflect the differences between qualifications,” he says.

“The AQF is then used as a tool to help with qualification design and accreditation and quality - assurance and so on, but the levels aren’t a separate thing in their own right against which people get assessed.”

This also means that qualifications can be built using components from different bands of education, and be focused on different skills and applications.

The next step is for the federal government to respond to the review, which federal Education Minister Dan Tehan says he hopes will occur before the end of the year. The review also will be formally put to two federal-state bodies, the Council of Australian Governments’ education council and skills council, because implementation will require the commonwealth and the states to work together.

Professor Noonan notes there is work still to be done. The panel has proposed a new body to complete the review, conduct further consultation and oversee a pilot of the recommendations

Finally, he has a key message for the tertiary education sector. A new AQF constructed along the lines outlined in the review does not mean that every tertiary qualification will need to be reaccredited, which would be a massive job.

It is intended that a new AQF would operate prospectively with new courses, not apply to existing qualifications.

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