

Comparisons between the English-QAA and Australian-AQF systems referencing the European Bologna agreement

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Please note this document is not intended to be part of the UON submission. During the Canberra consultation a number of the panel members expressed that my reflections on the comparative differences between the two systems would potentially be of use.

Volume of learning

Recommendation: retain volume of learning (learning hours / years of study) as a guide, but additionally define the total credits required to satisfy the qualification type and minimum credits attained at the level of study.

The current AQF documentation indicates that the generally accepted length of a full-time year, used for educational participation, is 1200 hours.

As a general rule, one UK credit equates to 10 hours of study; a 10-credit course unit therefore requires 100 hours of study on average. A year of study for a standard (i.e. non-accelerated) undergraduate program is equivalent to 120 credits so is approximately 1200 hours of study. Thus, in terms of volume of learning, using hours of study, UK students and Australian students have similar study loads.

The European systems uses ECTS credits to express the volume of learning based on the defined learning outcomes and their associated workload. 60 ECTS credits are allocated to the learning outcomes and associated workload of a full-time academic year or its equivalent. (See User Guide https://ec.europa.eu/education/ects/users-guide/docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf.) The correspondence of the full-time workload of an academic year to 60 credits is often formalised by national legal provisions. In most cases, workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, which means that one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work.

An important difference in the qualification level is between the award of honours degrees with the QAA-England requiring only three years of study. However, these differences are known across Europe, with institutions often requiring those who studied in the English system to gain a degree plus master for entry into programs in those countries who require 4 year for honours or its equivalent.

Level of learning

There are differences in the approaches to levels of learning between the English and Australian system with a clearer approach to nesting of qualifications to the English system and greater consistency as to how this is recognised within the Framework. While both systems use the same structure for nesting, the English system represents this in its progression of students throughout the degree program. In the Australian system, the AQF recognises that lower level qualifications can be embedded (nested) in a degree program as does the English system. The main difference is that all components of an Australian degree are said to be at level 7. However, in the case a degree with

embedded lower level qualifications this is unlikely to be the case and in reality students need preparation to get to level 7 so not all stages of a degree are realistically taught at the same level. The QAA recognise this by defining the minimum number of credits at each level. For instance:

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	QAA level	England
Bachelor's degrees with honours	6	360 (minimum 90 at level 6)
Bachelor's degrees	6	300 (minimum 60 at level 6)
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)	5	240 (minimum 90 at level 5)
Certificates of Higher Education (Cert HE)	4	120 (minimum 90 at level 4)

Such an approach combines volume and nested levels of learning provides for clarity around embedding of programs, yet protects the level of learning to ensure that graduates attain the appropriate standard when exiting each qualification.

Taxonomies and levels

Recommendation: remove the knowledge, skills and application of knowledge and skills from the level descriptors.

The Panel note that qualification level include descriptions of knowledge and skills and their application within both the level and qualification type descriptors As highlighted in the panel's documentation – Table 2 below). They propose removing this from the qualification type descriptor.

Table 2: Current AQF descriptors with duplication between levels and qualifications

Level Descriptors	Qualification Type Descriptors With Duplication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary Knowledge Skills Application of knowledge and skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose Knowledge Skills Application of knowledge and skills Volume of learning Pathways Responsibility for accreditation and development Authority to issue the qualification

Table 3: Current AQF descriptors with no duplication between levels and qualifications

Level Descriptors	Qualification Type Descriptors With No Duplication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary Knowledge Skills Application of knowledge and skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purpose Volume of learning Pathways Responsibility for accreditation and development Authority to issue the qualification

However, given that qualification types indicate differences between the qualification types removing this information will reduce clarity regarding the construct of the types. However, while removing the duplication seems sensible where qualifications type within a single level have very different skills and knowledge this will require definition of language that is so encompassing its meaningless or contains options which may add to greater confusion. As can be seen below, the QAA remove this issue by not defining levels and only defining the main qualification at each level. Instructions indicate that not all outcomes need to be met by other qualifications in that level. The AQF is currently much clearer in its definition, which would be lost if the current proposal of the panel was confirmed. Thus, removing the duplication from the level descriptor is recommended.

The QAA Approach

A qualification descriptor in the English system sets out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of a **particular type of qualification** (below a bachelor's degree with honours). The qualification descriptors describe the “threshold academic standard” for those qualification types in terms of the levels of knowledge and understanding and the types of abilities that holders of the relevant qualification are expected to have. Descriptors describe the nature and characteristics of the main qualification at each level, and comparison enables the nature and characteristics of change between qualifications at different levels. Qualification descriptors have two parts: the first part is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which is assessed and which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification; the second part is a statement of the wider abilities that the typical student could be expected to have developed.

The descriptors are based on ‘The Dublin Descriptors’ which consist of the following elements:

- Knowledge and understanding;
- Applying knowledge and understanding;
- Making judgements;
- Communication skills;
- Learning skills.

http://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_24496811_1.pdf

An example of the approach is set out below:

See: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks>

4.15 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6 on the FHEQ: bachelor's degree with honours

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any bachelor's degree with honours which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor should also be used as a reference point for other qualifications at level 6 of the FHEQ, including bachelor's degrees, and graduate diplomas.

Bachelor's degrees with honours are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline
- an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline
- conceptual understanding that enables the student:
 - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline
 - to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline
- an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge
- the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects
- critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem
- communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
 - o the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
 - o decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts
 - o the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature

Also note, at a level below these are subject benchmark which indicate the subject specific and generic skills for a significant number of disciplines (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements>)

Thus, the UK system removes the necessity of duplication by building the descriptors around the typical qualification outcomes for each level:

- level 4: Certificate of Higher Education
- level 5: Foundation Degree
- level 6: Bachelor's degree with honours
- level 7: Master's degree
- level 8: Doctoral degree