



Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)

Submission to Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework

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Compiled with the assistance of the staff and office bearers of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and its affiliated member organisations.

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Foreword

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 425,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international, postgraduates. We are comprised of 28 university and campus based postgraduate associations, as well as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA).

CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and activism, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders as well as Federal and State Governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties.

CAPA supports the notion of the AQF as one of several instruments to set minimum standards for the content and nature of qualifications. Defining qualification levels also allows students, graduates, and employers to identify the demands and outcomes of the type of course one has or is undertaking. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the current review. We also participated in a consultation interview for last year's preliminary review of credit pathways policy and practice within the AQF, as well as attending the consultation workshop for the current review.

Question one – in what ways is the AQF fit, or not fit, for purpose?

We are concerned that there is heightened pressure to reduce the duration, and therefore the breadth of content, in tertiary courses. This is due to ongoing cuts to higher education, as well as the change towards a mass-access tertiary system. We believe that the AQF has an important role to play in ensuring minimum durations and outcomes of tertiary courses, therefore upholding quality and value of these qualifications.

We believe that the AQF volume of learning requires some adjustment for the typical duration of the PhD. This proposal is outlined as our answer to question two below.

Question two - Where the AQF is not fit for purpose, what reforms should be made to it and what are the most urgent priorities? Please be specific, having regard to the possible approaches suggested in the discussion paper and other approaches.

Duration of the PhD

Doctoral degrees are defined at level 10 of the AQF; that is, they are the highest-level qualification that can be attained. The AQF specifies that the volume of learning is typically three to four years. We highlight two issues with the PhD volume of learning; firstly, that the volume as stated is incorrect; and secondly, that we believe the qualification should be four years (in real-time) to order to ward off pressures to shorten the PhD duration.

The AQF volume of learning explanation states that one year of full-time study is considered to be 1,200 hours (AQF Council, 2014). This equates to 23 hours per week each year (or 25 hours per week if four weeks' annual leave is taken). However, full-time doctoral students are

expected to work on their research for 30 hours per week; for example, the Federation University policy for Research Training Program (RTP) stipend recipients states that:

“Anything less than a commitment of 30 hours per week on a regular basis over the life of the degree will affect a timely completion.” (Federation University Australia, 2017).

Hypothetically, an exceptionally efficient student who only works the minimum 30 hours per week, takes their four weeks of annual leave, and completes their thesis and other course requirements in three years, would complete 4,320 hours on their research over the duration of their candidature. If we define an “AQF-year” as 1,200 hours, the hypothetical student has completed 3.6 “AQF-years” in a three-year period. Similarly, a student who completes their PhD in four years (at 30 hours per week, 48 weeks per year) has studied for 4.8 “AQF-years”. Therefore, the current typical range of three to four “AQF-years” to complete a doctorate equates to 3.6 to 4.8 years in real-time. This corresponds to average completion rates of four to five years (Unknown author, 2009).

Yet, universities are not this generous with their candidature times. Universities grant candidature and scholarships in terms of calendar years, not AQF-years. The current funding environment for PhDs is such that universities are incentivised to graduate their students quickly. This has led to shorter candidature times and scholarship durations (of the minimum three years) at many universities. Students often must pursue extensions and part-time enrolment in order to remain enrolled for a sufficient amount of time to complete the thesis. Doctoral students are under immense amounts of pressure due to this mis-match between the strenuous requirements of the PhD and the amount of candidature time allowed. In order to improve alignment and transparency between AQF standards and universities’ candidature and scholarship policies, we recommend that the AQF-year be redefined to be 30 hours per week for research degrees. We furthermore recommend that the typical volume of learning for doctoral study be amended to be four to five (in redefined AQF-years).

We note that this redefinition will bring the AQF in line with the notional ideal student who works only a standard 30-hour week. In practice, doctoral students tend to work on their research for far in excess of 30 hours per week. A recent study of PhD students studying off-campus in Australia—which sampled both part-time and full-time students—found that nearly 70% of survey respondents worked on their PhDs for 40 hours per week or more, on top of paid work and family commitments (Naylor, Chakravarti, and Baik 2018). Students, particularly in lab-based disciplines, report to us that they are instructed by their supervisors to work from morning to night as well as on weekends, and are sometimes not permitted to take the annual leave to which they are entitled.

The current inappropriately short volume of learning for the PhD impacts the quality of this qualification. Pressure for universities to shuttle through doctoral students quickly can also have the effect of decreasing the course requirements at some universities. For example, Monash University implemented a limit of 80,000 words (instead of the standard 100,000) for the doctoral thesis, for students enrolled from 2015 onwards (Monash University, 2016). We believe that such changes to the requirements negatively impact the learning outcomes and value of the PhD.

The AQF is able to oppose these damaging university policy changes, and reify the nature of the PhD as an original and substantial contribution to the sum of human knowledge, with

students having sufficient time to meet this standard. While there are some limitations to imposing a volume of learning, as discussed in the AQF review discussion paper, we believe that it should be retained as a broad-brush tool to shape university policy around candidature and scholarship duration. This is the case whether the AQF Review Panel retains the volume of learning measurement in years, or converts this to hours or some other unit as is posited in the review discussion paper.

Also, there is a suggestion in the review paper that the volume of learning should apply to a “new learner” rather than a “typical learner”. We caution that the definition of “new learner” must be considered carefully particularly towards the upper end of the AQF. It is highly unusual (though not unheard of) for a research student to be undertaking their research degree in a field unrelated to their earlier education. If the change towards “new learner” is imposed, we believe that order to maintain the volume of learning as a useful concept, a “new learner” for the purposes of honours and Masters by research degrees should be considered as someone who holds a bachelor-level qualification in their field of research; and a “new learner” commencing a PhD should be someone that holds both a bachelor-level qualification and either an honours or Masters in their field. We agree with the Australian Council of Graduate Research, as outlined in their submission to the current AQF review, that there is an opportunity to increase the volume of learning for those who enter a research degree without having all prerequisite knowledge of their field (ACGR 2019).

Finally, we note that if micro-credentials are introduced to certify research students’ professional development undertaken as part of their degree, the volume of learning will need to be adjusted to accommodate the time spent on these requirements. We also share the concerns of the Australian Council of Graduate Research that, while there is increasing expectation for skills training to be embedded in research degrees, the Government has not provided funding to universities to deliver these activities (ACGR 2019). Without sufficient resourcing, any supplementary training will not reach the quality expected for delivery as part of a research degree.

We recommend that:

1. The AQF Review Panel amends the definition of one year of doctoral study to equate to 30 hours per week over 48 weeks in a year, thus bringing “AQF-years” in line with the minimum expectations of doctoral students.
2. The volume of learning for the PhD be amended to “four to five years”.
3. The volume of learning for the research masters also be amended in line with average completion times.

Question three - In relation to approaches suggested by the Panel or proposed in submissions or through consultations, what are the major implementation issues the Review should consider? Please consider regulatory and other impacts.

Implications for Austudy eligibility

The AQF review discussion paper posits a way of fitting micro-credentials to the framework. If implemented, this may have impacts on students' eligibility to receive Centrelink study payments. Currently, domestic students in most postgraduate degrees are not eligible to access income support payments such as Austudy and Youth Allowance (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 2018). For the courses which do attract income support payments, this is on the basis of the course being the minimum legal or professional entry requirement for a profession, or the fastest or only pathway offered by the provider to gain an entry-level role (Department of Social Services 2018, p. 3). A micro-credential which styles itself as the fastest entry point to a profession would therefore displace Masters courses from Austudy eligibility.

CAPA has a long-held position that income support eligibility must be expanded to all domestic postgraduate students. However, being that this is not presently the case, the Panel must be cognizant of impacts to the existing flawed system and of not eroding the support that is available to some.

References

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