



Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework

Discussion Paper

DECEMBER 2018

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Review Panel wishes to draw on the considerable expertise and experience that has developed across a broad range of organisations and individuals in relation to the Review's [Terms of Reference](#).

In its discussion paper, the Panel has opted to provide to organisations and individuals some of the Panel's initial thinking about the case for change to the AQF, but invites differing analysis, conclusions and proposals.

To make a submission to the Review, please email this form to AQFReview@education.gov.au by 15 March 2019.

Please note that the Australian Government Department of Education and Training will not treat a submission as confidential unless requested that the whole submission, or part of the submission, be treated as such.

Please limit your response to no more than 3000 words.

Respondent name

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Respondent organisation (where relevant)

The University of Melbourne

1. In what ways is the AQF fit, or not fit, for purpose?

The AQF plays a crucial quality assurance role in Australia's tertiary education system. It is timely that it be reviewed in light of changes in the post-secondary education sector and in the expectations that students, businesses and the public have of it.

The following comments respond to the possible inclusion of shorter form courses in the AQF (raised in Section 4.1 of the Discussion Paper), with a specific focus on micro-credentials. While acknowledging the potential benefits of including micro-credentials within the AQF, the University of Melbourne argues that attempting to do so in the next phase of reform would risk constraining innovation in the development and delivery of micro-credentials. We therefore suggest that the Government monitor the development and evolution of micro-credentials to better understand the distinctive features of these courses of study and how they may fit within the AQF. With this deeper understanding and the development, in time, of a mature offering, future AQF reforms may be able

to accommodate these and other shorter form courses.

Overview of Micro-credentials

The term micro-credentialing refers to a digital mechanism that verifies specific knowledge, skills or abilities. In a higher education context, micro-credentials are typically understood to be modules of learning that are shorter than those of standard university subjects, units or programs.

As the Discussion Paper notes, demand for micro-credentials is increasing. A growing number of Australian universities are now providing these courses. The University of Melbourne is embracing this shift. The recently established '[Melbourne School of Professional and Continuing Education](#)' (MSPACE) provides lifelong learning opportunities through a range of professional, continuing and executive education programs. MSPACE is playing a leading role in developing the University's micro-credentialing frameworks.

A key feature of many micro-credentials is their so-called 'stack-ability'. Credit received can be aggregated or 'stacked', so that it is recognised in a traditional award program. This underscores the flexibility that micro-credentials provide. It allows students to tailor a program of study to their needs and interests, either treating a micro-credential as a discrete course, or treating it as part of a traditional length program.

Importantly, organisations whose core business is not education provision are also playing a role in the issuing of micro-credentials. IBM has, for example, begun issuing 'Open Badges' to learners who demonstrate 'resume-worthy' competencies in IBM products and platforms.¹

Micro-credentialing is also a site of collaboration between education providers and industry. To take one example, MSPACE offers a professional development course in '[Contract Management for Public Private Partnerships](#)' which has been developed in partnership with Foster Infrastructure Pty Ltd, and will be delivered by academics from the University of Melbourne, and representatives from Foster Infrastructure and from Victorian and New South Wales government agencies. The value of programs such as this relates to the combination of scholarly expertise with an understanding of the immediate skills needs in a given sector.

Growth in micro-credentialing is likely to continue. This is partly due to industry transition creating a need for workers to continuously update the currency of their skills throughout their work lives. Micro-credentials are also seen to have an advantage over traditional qualifications in providing more specific detail on learning outcomes – academic transcripts may be general and opaque compared with the information conveyed through micro-credentialing. While it is impossible to predict the trajectory that innovation in micro-credentialing will take, we should expect that providers will continue to experiment in the development of these programs, given the potential benefits relating to efficiency and to industry relevance.

Notwithstanding this trend, traditional length programs such as bachelor degrees will remain central to Australia's tertiary education system. The benefits that bachelor programs offer – concerning student experience, disciplinary depth and the preparation for higher degree courses – are not available through short courses that target very specific skills or knowledge. The expectation is that micro-credentials will complement traditional length programs, not replace them.

¹ See Leaser (2015), 'Open Badges: A better way to track skills and accomplishments'.

<https://www.ibm.com/blogs/ibm-training/open-badges-a-better-way-to-track-skills-and-accomplishments/>

The possible inclusion of micro-credentials in the AQF

Given micro-credentials represent an increasingly important part of post-secondary education in Australia, it is appropriate to consider whether and how these might be included in the AQF. The Discussion Paper identifies some of the benefits of amending the AQF to include shorter form courses:²

- Quality assurance: it would make shorter form courses part of the “existing quality assurance mechanism”, which may set quality benchmarks for these courses.
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): it would “give providers more confidence and capacity to grant credit for those credentials towards full qualifications”.
- Transparency: it would make the relationship between shorter form credentials and existing qualifications transparent. “It may also help these credentials to be recognised in Australia and internationally”.

The University of Melbourne recognises that there are likely benefits to an AQF that recognises micro-credentials. However, it is too early in the evolution of micro-credentials to attempt such reforms. Given the diversity that is inherent in micro-credential offerings, and given that micro-credentials are a relatively recent addition to the tertiary education landscape, there is a danger that attempting to embed them in the AQF will stifle innovation in course design and delivery, thereby inhibiting universities and other providers from advancing the lifelong learning agenda.

Micro-credentialing is an umbrella term that can mask the diversity of learning programs to which it is applied. In the interest of underscoring this diversity, we note the range of categorisations at which micro-credentials vary:

Relationship to award courses

Micro-credentials issued by universities or other education providers differ significantly in the way that they relate to award courses. Some are used *inside* an award course, to certify attainment of attributes acquired through that course. Some are used *alongside* an award course to recognise additional training or participation in extra-curricular activities. Finally, some are used *outside* of an award course to recognise small modules of learning, sometimes for the purpose of RPL.

Length

Micro-credentials vary in length. In a university context, the term is typically used to refer to modules of learning that are shorter than standard university subjects, units or programs i.e. less than 0.125 equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL). There is, however, no obvious framework for measuring the length of micro-credentials, nor an acceptance that length of course is an appropriate way of categorising all micro-credentials.

Level

Micro-credentials differ in the way they relate to existing AQF levels. Some micro-credentials can be aggregated or ‘stacked’ for the purposes of RPL and may be located at a given AQF level. In other cases, insisting that a micro-credential be tied to a given level will be less appropriate in view of the course aims or the competencies involved.

Provider type

Micro-credentials are issued by universities, non-university providers in both the higher

² See p.15.

education and vocational education sector, and by organisations whose core business is not education provision.

The key point is that some micro-credentials would 'fit in' to an amended AQF better than others, and in any case the AQF would need a major overhaul in order for a significant share of the current micro-credential market to be included in it. In the absence of a fuller understanding of the behaviour of issuers, business and students relating to micro-credentials, such an overhaul is likely to be premature.

Given these challenges, the University of Melbourne suggests that it is appropriate to adopt a 'watch and act' approach to micro-credentials rather than seeking to immediately include them in the AQF. This would ensure that we avoid premature reforms that inhibit innovation in micro-credential development and delivery and would allow time to develop a better understanding of shorter form courses and their compatibility with the AQF.

Recommendations

The University of Melbourne recommends that the Government:

- **not seek to include micro-credentials in the AQF in the next set of reforms**
- **monitor the provision of micro-credentials to better understand the efficacy of the shorter form courses of study and their compatibility with the AQF ahead of possible future reforms that include micro-credentials in the AQF.**

2. 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.

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3. 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.

Other