**Adult Learning Australia**

Submission:

# AQF Review

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# About ALA

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Australian Government's AQF Review.

ALA has been operating for 59 years as the peak not for profit organisation for adult and community education (ACE) in Australia. We have over 1,100 members. They are located across every state and territory in urban, regional, rural and remote communities.

ALA's membership is diverse and includes organisations such as community colleges, neighbourhood houses, community learning centres, U3As, Aboriginal learning cooperatives and individuals working in TAFE, university and other educational institutions.

## What is ACE?

Adult and community education (ACE) is a discrete fourth sector of education in Australia that is not for profit and community based. ACE organisations include Neighbourhood Houses, Community Learning Centres, Community Resource Centres, Community Colleges, Indigenous Cooperatives and Adult Education Institutions such as the Centre for Adult Education and Workers Education Associations.

ACE programs build community capacity, enhance social cohesion and promote health and wellbeing. They foster skill development and provide vocationally focussed education and training programs and pathways. ACE organisations have a strong presence across Australia, particularly in rural and regional communities, where they offer a broad range of programs and services alone or in partnership with other agencies.

The ACE sector is recognised for its ability to engage jobseekers in foundation and industry skills program as a 'soft point of entry' to vocational education and training (VET), often working with the jobseeker to address a broad range of barriers impacting on employability.

Research shows that ACE providers offer a platform for disengaged and/or disadvantaged adults to:

- transition back into learning
- develop basic skills for work
- improve language, literacy and numeracy (LLN)
- pathway into formal learning programs.

ACE is an important and recognisable sector of education that is not for profit and provides accessible lifelong and lifewide learning opportunities that are responsive to the education needs of adults 15 years and over.

## ACE services

ACE organisations offer all or some of the following services:

- Personal enrichment learning and pathway programs
- Adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy (LLN) and other foundation skills (both accredited and non-accredited)
- Foundation skills in computers and the new technologies
- Formal vocational education and training (VET).

ACE has strong expertise in working with second chance learners, disengaged and disadvantaged cohorts and older learners. The organisations provide inclusive learning environments to enable people to transition back into learning, develop skills for work and life, improve LLN and offer pathways into formal learning programs.

# Fit for purpose, or not?

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) sets out the different levels of nationally recognised qualifications in Australia by describing 10 qualification levels across VET and higher education. It provides a useful national framework for senior secondary school, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education qualifications.

In its current form, the AQF fails to deliver in terms of:

- supporting a lifelong learning model;

- reflecting learning in different contexts; and most importantly in

- reducing the barriers to successful participation in the system by disadvantaged cohorts.

## Recognising all types of learning

Lifelong learning is about recognising that learning occurs continuously throughout life. It helps people deal with new challenges and respond to ever-changing cultural, social and economic circumstances by developing their skills, knowledge and the capacity to think critically.

Lifelong learning is not limited to formal education and training but occurs in a range of contexts (home, community, workplaces and institutions) and settings (formal, non-formal and informal).

For example, government funded non-accredited programs, such as those offered through the Adult Community Education (ACE) sector in Victoria, NSW and South Australia, offer viable pathways to further education and training within their own quality framework. These programs target disadvantaged adult learners and identified priority cohorts, and research in Victoria shows that pathways from pre-accredited to industry level vocational training and jobs are actually stronger than from Certificate I and IIs.

The AQF must go further in terms of embracing a lifelong learning model not just to ensure productivity but also to promote access, equity and social inclusion. The review must also acknowledge that recognition processes are challenging for disadvantaged cohorts due to a lack of information and because the processes are tricky to navigate.

### Recommendations

- Some consideration should be given to how non-accredited programs intersect with the AQF; for example, a mechanism that ensures smoother transitions from non-accredited to accredited qualifications and less challenging processes for credit recognition.

- Any approach in this area that involves onerous and additional layers of compliance is not appropriate for an already over-stretched sector working with the most disadvantaged adult learners.

- There should be a comprehensive analysis of the international models outlined in the contextual research (PhillipsKPA, 2018) including the NZQF and the Swedish SeOF; particularly in terms of the efficacy of its attempts to make all learning visible – from informal, non-formal and formal – and to set achievable recognition processes in place.

## The role of lower level qualifications

Structural changes are required for lower level qualifications that are targeted towards the most vulnerable members of our society. Unfortunately, 'shoehorning' people into vocationally orientated low level qualifications (i.e. Levels I & II) is counter-productive for the students, and qualifications below Level III are not well-received by the workplace.

While embedding literacy in vocational programs is recognised as having pedagogical value, LLN experts recognise that learners with very low-level skills benefit from stand-alone delivery methods, without a vocational context.

### Recommendations

- Given that Certificates I and II are targeted towards the most vulnerable members of our society and completion rates are low, a more prudent approach may be to remove the vocational orientation of lower level qualifications and quarantine them to curriculum-based foundational skills.

- At Certificate II, some vocational content could potentially overlay the foundational content and facilitate a pathway into a vocationally orientated Certificate III.

## Misunderstanding the AQF

Some of the concepts, definitions and language used in the AQF may facilitate misinterpretations or misunderstandings, which may result in providers, teachers and trainers simply following training package and funding requirements – without any reference to the AQF. For example, there is wide variation across providers in terms of interpreting a qualification's volume of learning; which is particularly problematic at the lower levels.

### Recommendations

- Some consideration should be given to how 'volume of learning' is defined in order to ensure clarity for AQF users, and to circumvent practices that seek to reduce the expected volume of learning for unethical reasons and those which undermine the requirements of the qualification.

- Revisions to the AQF should synthesise, link and simplify both language and levels in relation to the Australian Core Skills Framework; the Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework and training packages.

- There should be a single data source that provides information and professional development for providers, teachers and trainers about all aspects of the AQF to ensure they understand its purpose; what is meant

by the terminology, such as volume of learning and the various descriptors, etc.

- Revisions to descriptors should seek to ensure clarity. This is particularly important for VET qualifications to ensure they accurately reflect the levels of responsibility and autonomy required.

- Any changes to the AQF should seek to enable teacher autonomy and flexibility in terms of teaching and learning methodologies, learning environments and solutions.

- Changes should also enable innovation and ensure high quality learning outcomes.

- Revisions to the AQF should strive to achieve clarity within a simple framework in terms of levels and learning outcomes.

## Enabling autonomy and flexibility

Stackable micro-credentials may provide a way to develop particular skills or to achieve an award over time. However, by their very nature they are diverse and necessarily responsive to change so it's difficult to see how the AQF could effectively incorporate them.

### Recommendations

- The AQF review could consider new pathway and recognition processes for micro-credentials and short course as opposed to creating a new qualification type.

- The AQF review must also take into account the inherent differences between VET competency-based training and higher education in terms of micro-credentials.

- If micro-credentials are introduced as a new qualification type, there must be accompanying quality assurance measures.

- Revisions to the AQF that include micro-credentials should also consider if they enable 'sustained learning'; where they most appropriately fit in the system and how this more atomistic style of learning will be captured for recognition purposes.

## Enterprise and social skills

21st Century, enterprise, social or soft skills such as adaptability, innovation, design, problem-solving, critical analysis, empathy and creativity support people to adapt and transfer knowledge to new contexts, while continuously developing new skills and knowledge throughout their lives.

### Recommendation

The AQF must recognise the importance of soft skills in education and training, and at each AQF level. But an interpretation of how they apply in specific levels and qualifications should be left open.