

Chapter 6

Quality Assurance and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education: Australia

by

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This chapter provides a general overview of frameworks for quality assurance and recognition of academic and professional qualifications in higher education in Australia. It includes information on the Australian Qualifications Framework, the Australian Universities Quality Agency and the Code of Ethical Practice in the Provision of Education to International Students by Australian Universities developed by the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC). Finally, it raises some issues and challenges in relation to international quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications.

6.1. Quality assurance and accreditation system in Australia

Australia has a federal system and responsibility for higher education is shared between the Australian Government and State and Territory governments. Universities in Australia are established by Commonwealth, State or Territory legislation. The use of the term “university” is protected in legislation and institutions need government authority to use it. Universities are “self-accrediting”: they are authorised to accredit their own courses and are responsible for their academic standards. The titles of higher education qualifications are similarly protected, so that providers can only offer a course leading to a higher education qualification after obtaining government permission.

The National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes (see www.dest.gov.au/highered/mceetya_cop.htm), which have been agreed by all States and Territories and the Commonwealth, have been designed to ensure that consistent standards are applied across Australia in such matters as the recognition of new universities, the operation of overseas higher

1. This chapter was prepared by the Department of Education, Science and Training, Australia, represented by Matthew James, Australian delegation to the OECD.

education institutions in Australia, and the accreditation of higher education courses to be offered by non self-accrediting providers. Most States and Territories have enacted legislation to implement the Protocols.

Each State and Territory government has an accreditation authority responsible for matters such as the establishment and recognition of self-accrediting universities and the accreditation of courses to be offered by non-self accrediting higher education providers. Where a university or provider seeks to operate in Australia's external Territories, it must be listed as a self-accrediting institution on the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Register, or be accredited by the authority. Each of these authorities is listed on the AQF Register of Recognised Education Institutions and Authorised Accreditation Authorities in Australia (see www.aqf.edu.au/register.htm).

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) is an independent national agency which promotes, audits, and reports on quality assurance for Australian higher education providers. AUQA also audits the operations of the accrediting agencies (www.auqa.edu.au). Reports are publicly available on the AUQA website. AUQA has also indicated that it will seek to commission a review of its own operations after the completion of its first round of institutional audits (a five-year cycle).

6.2. Cross-border quality assurance and accreditation

Australia as a receiving country

Quality assurance of cross-border higher education in Australian higher education is mainly the responsibility of the receiving country of service (*i.e.* Australia), but does take account of the status of a provider in its home country. There is some provision in the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes for collaboration between the receiving and sending country to occur, but not through formal bilateral or multilateral agreements.

The National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes address the following:

- Protocol One: Criteria and processes for recognition of universities.
- Protocol Two: Overseas higher education institutions seeking to operate in Australia.
- Protocol Three: The accreditation of higher education courses to be offered by non self-accrediting institutions.

- Protocol Four: Delivery arrangements for higher education institutions involving other organisations.
- Protocol Five: Endorsement of courses for overseas students.

Protocol Two outlines the requirements for the operation of overseas higher education institutions in Australia. This includes verification of the credentials of the provider in the country of origin and requires that the courses to be offered have been properly accredited in the provider's country of origin by an appropriate authority.

The assessment of foreign providers in Australia is based on the following criteria:

- the course or courses are comparable in requirements and learning outcomes to a course at the same level in a similar field in Australia;
- the delivery arrangements, including the arrangements for academic oversight and quality assurance proposed by the overseas institution are comparable to those offered by accredited Australian providers; and
- appropriate financial and other arrangements exist to permit the successful delivery of the course in the Australian jurisdiction.

Approximately 20% of international students enrolled by Australian institutions undertake their courses off-shore. From 2005, the Commonwealth will commission the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) to strengthen audits of overseas higher education provision by Australian providers with examination on a whole-of-country basis being considered. These audits will be on a cyclical basis, and will complement existing audits of individual institutions, which currently include an assessment of the institution's overseas operations.

Australia as a sending country

As an exporting country of higher education, the Commonwealth *Educational Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000* regulates the provision of education to international students. Providers need to meet various obligations under the ESOS legislation, which, in broad terms, requires them to:

- be registered on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS) (<http://cricos.dest.gov.au>);
- meet quality assurance standards;
- comply with tuition and financial assurance requirements; and

- encourage overseas students recruited to study in Australia to comply with the conditions of their visas, and report those who do not.

In addition, the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC), which represents most Australian universities, has developed the *Code of Ethical Practice in the Provision of Education to International Students by Australian Universities* to guide activities in this regard.

Other mechanisms for quality assurance in Australia

Self-accrediting Australian higher education institutions operate under their own institutional legislation which allows them to approve, deliver and confer their own qualifications. For overseas campuses the institution is expected to maintain standards at least equivalent to those provided in Australia. Where an Australian university or other self-accrediting institution operates overseas and issues an award under its own name, the governing body of the institution is responsible for quality assurance and will be subject to audit by AUQA.

The Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training maintains a website providing information on how to check the accreditation status of an organisation that calls itself a “university”, offers “degree” awards, or both, and appears to be operating in Australia. There is also an enquiry service which allows users of the site to send questions to DEST about an Australian institution or one which appears to be Australian. This site can be found at www.dest.gov.au/highered/alert/default.htm.

6.3. Recognition of academic qualifications

Framework for recognition of academic qualifications across borders

Recognition of overseas qualifications for specific professional, employment or study purposes is undertaken by the relevant professional bodies, employers and educational institutions respectively. The Australian Government seeks to facilitate and inform decisions about the comparability of overseas qualifications with Australian qualifications.

Australia’s framework for the assessment and recognition of overseas educational qualifications is coordinated nationally through the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (AEI-NOOSR), an office of the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

AEI-NOOSR’s mission is to help the overseas-trained to work and study in Australia by providing information, advice and assistance in relation to the recognition of overseas qualifications and skills, and to encourage

improved international arrangements for the recognition of qualifications and skills.

AEI-NOOSR undertakes research and analysis on overseas education systems and qualifications and develops guidelines for the assessment of overseas educational qualifications in terms of their comparability with Australian educational qualifications. AEI-NOOSR publishes its research findings and guidelines in the *Country Education Profile* (CEP) series. The CEPs are used by Australian educational institutions, professional bodies, skills assessing authorities, government agencies and employers to inform the assessment of overseas qualifications for specific study, employment or professional recognition purposes in Australia. AEI-NOOSR further supports the recognition framework in Australia by providing training, advice and assistance to agencies involved in the assessment of overseas qualifications and by acting as the “assessor of last resort” (*i.e.* for those qualifications not covered by the CEP guidelines).

In addition, Australia participates in both bilateral and multilateral recognition agreements. Australia has established Mutual Recognition Agreements with a number of countries, which facilitate qualifications assessments. Australia has also ratified the UNESCO *Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific* (the Regional Convention) and the *Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Recognition Convention)*, both of which oblige Members to recognise qualifications awarded by other Member States unless there is a compelling reason not to.

Procedures for recognition of academic degrees

Educational assessments of overseas qualifications for general purposes are provided by Australian State and Territory Government overseas qualification and skills recognition units (OQUs) and by AEI-NOOSR. The State and Territory Government OQUs provide assessments on the basis of AEI-NOOSR’s published guidelines. In cases where an overseas qualification is not covered by the published guidelines, AEI-NOOSR can provide an educational assessment for individuals. Like the CEPs, the opinion expressed in an educational assessment is AEI-NOOSR’s opinion only and it is not binding on higher education institutions.

Educational assessments are used to assist individuals to:

- make the educational level of overseas qualifications clear to employers or potential employers;
- help clarify training plans and career plans;

- make it easier to apply for entry into a course at an Australian RTO (Registered Training Organisation), university, or other higher educational institution or training organisation;
- help to gain credit at Australian RTOs, universities or other higher education institutions for study already completed by providing additional information to the Australian institution; or
- help in applying for registration or licensing to work in a specific occupation or profession.

AEI-NOOSR publishes and disseminates information about the procedures for individuals to have their educational qualifications assessed in Australia (see *www.dest.gov.au/noosr*).

Criteria for decisions

Universities make their own decisions about the suitability of overseas qualifications for admission to a programme of study, although they may seek advice from AEI-NOOSR, and from State/Territory tertiary admission centres who act on behalf of institutions to process applications for admission according to assessment guidelines agreed to by member institutions.

AEI-NOOSR's educational assessments are based on careful consideration of a variety of qualitative and quantitative factors. Some of these factors are:

- the education system of the country where the study was undertaken;
- the recognition status of the awarding institution and/or qualification in the country concerned;
- the structure, length, and level of the programme of studies undertaken; and
- the educational outcomes of the qualification.

Information about the criteria and methodology used is published in AEI-NOOSR's CEPs, on its website and in general information leaflets.

AEI-NOOSR's guidelines do not differentiate between qualifications awarded following traditional programmes of study and those awarded following distance education, including on-line education and study at an overseas campus of the awarding institution, unless the study programme, its level, or its outcomes are significantly different. Rather AEI-NOOSR's assessment methodology relies on the recognition status of the awarding

institution, and whether it has the appropriate authorisation to award the qualifications in question in the education system of the home country.

Experience suggests that as the labour market becomes more internationalised (and with an increasingly broad range of overseas trained employees), employers are relying to a greater extent on external advice about overseas academic qualifications.

6.4. Recognition of professional qualifications

Framework for recognition of professional qualifications across borders

In Australia, the professional bodies have a high degree of autonomy. The Commonwealth Government has no powers to make decisions on the recognition of professional qualifications awarded in other countries, except for decisions relating to skilled migration.

In Australia the professions fall into three main groups: those which are regulated by law such as architecture and dentistry, those which are self-regulating such as accountancy and engineering, and those which are unregulated such as computing and social work. In the case of the professions regulated by law, registration boards are established under State and Territory legislation. The legislation covering the recognition of professional qualifications can vary between the States and Territories within Australia, although under the Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) between the Australian Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments a person registered or licensed to carry out an occupation in one Australian jurisdiction is entitled to carry out an equivalent occupation in any other jurisdiction without the need to undergo further assessment of qualifications or experience. In the case of self-regulating professions, the power to make recognition decisions lies with the relevant professional body. For the unregulated professions, the decision is made by the employer.

In addition to the functions already outlined, AEI-NOOSR within DEST monitors recognition pathways for the overseas-trained and, through a number of products and services, promotes recognition that is fair, equitable and transparent. AEI-NOOSR regularly updates its publication *The AEI-NOOSR Guide to Professional Recognition in Australia*² on recognition arrangements in the professions to support its role in approving and monitoring professional assessing authorities.

2. Available at www.dest.gov.au/noosr/leaflets/index.htm

Mutual recognition arrangements provide another pathway to gaining recognition of professional qualifications in Australia. These include: multi-lateral professional mobility frameworks; mutual recognition arrangements (MRAs) and memoranda of understandings (MoUs); and the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Arrangement (TTMRA).

Multi-lateral professional mobility frameworks

Australia has promoted the development of multilateral professional mobility frameworks within the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), first through the APEC Engineer Registers and currently through the APEC Architect project.

The APEC Engineer Registers list suitably qualified and experienced engineers who have been assessed according to agreed criteria, thus providing individuals with improved access to independent practice in all participating APEC economies. The APEC Architect project, which is now under way, aims to establish similar mobility arrangements for appropriately qualified and experienced architects in participating APEC economies.

Other mutual recognition arrangements have been undertaken separately but are complementary in nature. One example is the Washington Accord which recognises the substantial equivalence of the programmes accredited by those bodies, and recommends that graduates of such accredited programmes be recognised by the other countries as having met the academic requirements for entry to the practice of engineering. (The signatories are Australia; Canada; Hong Kong, China; Ireland; New Zealand; South Africa; the United Kingdom and the United States with Japan, Germany, Malaysia and Singapore with a provisional membership status.)

Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs)

A number of professional associations have established MoUs or MRAs with their counterparts overseas. These bodies may be eligible for DEST support to assist their efforts to negotiate bilateral and multilateral arrangements for the recognition of professional qualifications.

The Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Arrangement (TTMRA)

The TTMRA is a non-treaty instrument between the Australian State and Territory Governments with the exception of western Australian Government, and the Government of New Zealand. It aims to overcome unnecessary regulatory impediments to the mobility of labour and trade in

goods between the two countries. In regard to professional mobility a person registered or licensed to practise an occupation in New Zealand is entitled to practise an equivalent occupation in Australia and vice versa, without the need to undergo further assessment of qualifications or experience. The TTMRA covers all registrable occupations, except medical practitioners.

Procedures for recognition of academic degrees as professional qualifications

In order to practise in the regulated and self-regulated professions in Australia, individuals with overseas academic and professional qualifications need to have their qualifications recognised by the appropriate State/Territory regulatory authority or professional body, respectively.

In the case of the self-regulating professions, professional associations determine whether an applicant's qualification is comparable to an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) qualification, and whether it meets the requirements for professional practice in Australia.

Assessments of overseas qualifications by State and Territory authorities and professional associations are generally informed by guidelines and research produced by AEI-NOOSR. For certain professions, additional requirements are determined by the professional association before the candidate is considered eligible to practise that profession in Australia. This may take the form of an examination, professional interview or the fulfilment of a period of supervised practice.

Relationship of recognition of professional qualifications and bilateral or multilateral agreements on quality assurance and accreditation

With the degree of mobility of students and graduates which has now developed in the region, it is essential not only that the quality of the qualifications awarded be assured in the home system, but also that regional partners in higher education are confident in the quality of each other's systems and have a good understanding of the context of each other's qualifications. Australia considers that better recognition of qualifications will be achieved through the development and maintenance of effective national arrangements for recognition of qualifications and quality assurance, with a much increased commitment to international cooperation in these fields. For this reason the Australian Government is taking an active role in the Asia-Pacific region, and more widely, to promote the international transparency and recognition of higher education qualifications, so that both exporting and importing countries can have a better appreciation of each others' systems.

Effects of increasing internationalisation of labour market for skilled people

Both professional recognition agreements and academic recognition agreements represent very effective ways of encouraging mobility while ensuring that quality is maintained in the participating countries.

Australia is responding to the challenges of the increasing internationalisation of the labour market through its engagement in bilateral and multi-lateral dialogue on recognition of qualifications. To meet its obligations under the Lisbon Recognition Convention, Australia is promoting the use of the Diploma Supplement³ by Australian higher education institutions. While this initiative originated from an academic recognition agreement, it will also have considerable benefits for potential employers as it provides a description of the qualification, information about its level, the content of the programme of study leading to the qualification, and an explanation of the function of the qualification (for example, whether the qualification admits the recipient to further study or registration as a professional).

In Australia, in relation to recognition of qualifications for employment purposes, the final decision rests however with employers and professional associations. With increasing internationalisation, experience suggests that employers are relying to a greater extent on external advice about overseas qualifications. AEI-NOOSR continues to provide advice and information to these groups.

6.5. Key issues and challenges

With the rapid internationalisation of higher education and the expansion of cross-border provision, quality assurance is increasingly the focus of national governments, international organisations and other relevant bodies. These developments and the related growth in student and graduate mobility are accompanied by increasing awareness of the strong links between quality assurance and qualifications recognition.

Australia has been active in the Asia-Pacific region in terms of establishing a stronger network of regional recognition bodies through the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Recognition Convention and establishing

3. A Diploma Supplement is a document issued to graduates by the awarding institution in addition to the testamur. Its purpose is to make the qualification more portable and its value more transparent by providing a description of the nature, level, context and status of the studies that were pursued and completed by the graduate, as well as information about the education system to which the qualification belongs.

(where possible) bilateral and multilateral recognition arrangements with other countries.

In conjunction with the Seventh Session of the Asia-Pacific Regional Recognition Convention in Perth in March 2003, AEI-NOOSR hosted the Seminar on the Assessment of Overseas Qualifications, which was designed to foster the development of a community of regional qualifications assessors as a practical step towards achieving the goals of the Regional Convention to promote regional and worldwide cooperation in the comparability and recognition of studies and academic qualifications, and to promote the collection, dissemination and exchange of information and documentation on studies, degrees and diplomas. The Assessment Seminar agreed to develop the Asia Pacific Academic Recognition Network (APARNET) (www.aparnet.org) – a website and e-discussion forum on recognition issues for assessing authorities in Asia and the Pacific, initiated by Australia – to enhance discussion and information exchange. A Working Group was also established to consider the question of the assessment of qualifications gained after distance or on-line study, or following study at an off-shore campus of an overseas institution. The Working Group will present a paper on the assessment of such qualifications at the next Asia-Pacific assessment seminar in 2005.

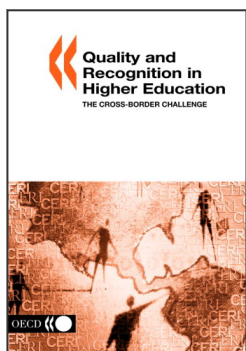
As a result of the internationalisation of higher education, new degrees proliferate and students and graduates have become more mobile. In this context, clearer information about higher education qualifications is increasingly necessary for access to further education and for employment and migration purposes. Fora such as APARNET can provide a valuable means of sharing information and documentation and can facilitate communication and interaction between countries. In addition, new forms of delivery of higher education have challenged the traditional concept of the “higher education institution”. In this changing environment, it is important to take into account components of non-traditional learning which include: the recognition of study abroad; in-country cross-institutional study; online learning; various kinds of prior learning; and work experience undertaken as a component of the higher education qualification. The Diploma Supplement could provide an opportunity to contextualise these elements of learning within the qualification documentation.

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