



Vocational qualification development: lessons from overseas



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INTRODUCTION

Streamlining the vocational qualification development process in Australia is a current priority of the skills ministers of both the Australian Government and state and territory governments. This research summary explores the development processes associated with vocational qualifications in selected countries and compares them with the current process in Australia, with the aim of identifying any areas where efficiencies can be made.

The international processes examined apply to Canada, Finland, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. Detailed information for each of these countries can be found in the support document, *International models to streamline VET qualifications: case studies*.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The qualification development process for each country operates in the context of its own vocational education and training (VET) system and broader governance framework; no international process appears to be more efficient or effective than Australia's, but there are elements that could be adapted to improve the approach in Australia.
- In the Australian process, the role of educators and educational institutions in technical advisory groups and in qualification development appears, on paper, to be similar to international processes. However, greater transparency in how the contribution of each influences the outcomes may improve the current perception that they have little involvement.
- In many of the countries examined, the regulator is involved in the qualification development process, mainly through the final approval of qualifications. In Australia, the VET regulators have little or no involvement in the training package development process, but they do accredit courses.
- Australia's federated system is a factor in the duration of the qualification approval process. The literature did not reveal details about the potential efficiencies within each development stage so further research that examines the collaborative practices and conflict resolution processes that may be contributing to the overall length of the process would be informative.

THE MOVE TO STREAMLINE QUALIFICATION DEVELOPMENT

A streamlined qualification development process will allow the VET system to respond more readily to the changing needs of industry.

The current qualification development process in Australia is contentious, as it can take anywhere between one and four-and-a-half years for a qualification to be developed, and another one to three years before the same qualification is delivered by registered training organisations (RTOs) (Fyusion 2018). Recently, there have been moves to streamline the national VET system, with the expected maximum timeframes for development work recently outlined in the Training Package Development and Endorsement Process policy: fast-tracked (six-eight months), routine (12 months) and complex (18 months) (Australian Industry Skills Committee 2020). The premise is that by improving efficiency in the qualification development process, the VET system will be able to respond more readily to the changing needs of industry.

Figure 1 provides a simple overview of the current training package development process in Australia.

Figure 1 Training package development process in Australia



Source: Australian Industry and Skills Committee (2019, p.14).

COMPARING QUALIFICATION DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

How does the qualification development process in Australia compare with the processes used overseas? What are some of the key similarities and differences?

How is the need for a new qualification identified?

For the majority of the international processes examined, the need for changes to qualifications is driven by industry. In some systems, such as those in Finland, Singapore and the United Kingdom, decisions are based on industry demand or changing skill needs in the labour market, identified through skills-anticipation exercises or sector reviews (Cedefop & Finnish National Agency for Education 2019; Qualifications Wales 2016). New Zealand’s process incorporates consultation with industry, a specific sector or the community to identify the need for new qualifications, while in Ontario (province of Canada) qualification needs can be identified by colleges (Conestoga College 2019; New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2016). The South African process allows any person or organisation to apply for a new qualification (Quality Council for Trades & Occupations 2014), as is possible in Australia for accredited courses.

In Australia, identifying the need for changes or new qualifications is also industry-driven. The industry reference committees (IRCs), which represent industry in the training package development process, are the main drivers of change to qualifications through their ‘skill forecasts and proposed schedules of work’. Other options to initiate

change include regulatory change, an industry proposal to the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC), submission of a ‘case for change’ to the AISC, or strategic directives from skills ministers or the AISC (Australian Industry and Skills Committee 2019).

Who leads the development process?

Two main approaches to the development process used in the selected countries have been identified – a government-led (and funded) approach or a stakeholder-led approach. Each country’s process is informed by a range of factors external to the VET system, such as the socio-political context, public appetite for having government steer the development of training standards, or industry desire for funding development themselves.

Finland and Singapore have government-led processes. In Finland, the Finnish National Agency for Education (a government body) leads the development of qualification requirements (Cedefop & Finnish National Agency for Education 2019), while in Singapore several government agencies work together through the Future of Economy Council (Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry 2020).

On the other hand, New Zealand, the UK and South Africa have a more stakeholder-led development process. Qualification development in these countries tends not to be led by groups established by government; instead, the process is initiated by bodies such as training organisations, industry representative bodies or community groups (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2016; Scottish Qualifications Authority 2018; Quality Council for Trades & Occupations 2014). The role of government tends to be limited to outlining the qualification standards, providing development resources and/or approving the resultant training products. In New Zealand developers may apply to a training development fund provided by government, but in other countries industry or training organisations fund their own development work.

The process in Australia is most aligned to the stakeholder-led approach, with training package development led by the IRCs, with support from government-funded skills service organisations (SSOs) and the AISC Secretariat.

Who drafts the qualifications?

In Australia, the drafting of training package material is led by IRCs with support from SSOs and technical advisory groups (TAGs), consisting of industry and educational representatives. Other stakeholders, such as broader industry representatives and state training authorities (STAs), are also consulted by SSOs. A 2018 report found that the role of RTOs and trainers in the development of training packages and in consultations had decreased over the years (Fyusion 2018). However, more recent information provided by the skills service organisations indicates that RTO representatives are part of many industry reference committees and technical advisory groups. It may well be that the perception of educators’ involvement in qualification development differs from the reality; that is to say, they are more involved than generally believed. Consideration might therefore be given to greater transparency in the qualification development process to demonstrate their involvement more clearly.

Many of the countries researched feature a government-funded service or body that drafts or helps to guide the drafting of qualifications and related materials. Examples include standard-setting organisations in Scotland, qualifications-development facilitators in South Africa, and a subcommittee of the Future Economy Council in Singapore (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2018c; Quality Council for Trades & Occupations 2014; Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry 2020).

What are the key decision/approval points and who is involved?

Many countries have fewer approval and decision points in their qualification development processes than Australia. This may reflect Australia’s federated system and the need to provide each jurisdiction with the

opportunity to review drafts prior to national approval. Other federated nations make a more conservative effort at national accreditation, for example, Canada's Red Seal program, which is limited to common trade qualifications, acknowledging the importance of occupational mobility across the country. However, the work of achieving national consensus can be time-consuming.

In Australia, there are four decision and approval points for developers to pass: approval of the case for change by the AISC; sign-off of activity order by the AISC Secretariat; approval of the case for endorsement by the AISC, based on recommendations from the AISC Secretariat; and final endorsement of training package content by the skills ministers (Fyusion 2018). South Africa's process also has four decision and approval points (Quality Council for Trades & Occupations 2014). New Zealand has two distinct development stages, both concluding with a decision on the suitability of the proposed qualification (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2020). Other countries, such as Finland, England and Scotland, have only one final approval step rather than stage gates throughout the development process.

In most of the countries examined, the regulators have the final approval of qualifications; for example, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, South African Quality Authority, Finnish National Agency for Education and Scottish Qualifications Authority Accreditation.

This situation contrasts with Australia, where an industry-led body, the Australian Industry Skills Committee, recommends training packages for endorsement by the skills ministers. (This represents a recent policy change, from skills ministers approving training packages after implementation based on endorsement from the AISC.) The national regulator, the Australian Skills Quality Authority, as well as the two state-based regulators – the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) and the Training Accreditation Council (TAC) in Western Australia – have limited involvement in the training package development process but do approve accredited courses. England has recently moved to a similar process, whereby the approval of higher technical qualifications is now carried out by an independent, employer-led, institution rather than the regulator (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education 2020).

Who is consulted and when?

In consultations on qualification content, all countries included employers, industry bodies, professional bodies, industry regulators, unions, government, teachers and VET providers. However, Australia's relatively small representation of teachers and VET providers in consultation activity is a key difference in the processes of the other countries explored. Additionally, Ontario (Canada) was unique in including graduates of programs as stakeholders (Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities 2017).

Differences between countries in relation to the number of times that stakeholders are consulted throughout the development process are also found. In Australia, consultation occurs at four different stages (Fyusion 2018); in New Zealand at three stages (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2020); and in South Africa, in two stages (Quality Council for Trades & Occupations 2014). Scotland only has one step for consultation (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2018). It was unclear how often stakeholder consultation occurred in the systems of the remaining countries.

Who is involved in quality assurance and when does it occur?

Details on the quality assurance processes associated with qualification development and the people or groups involved are limited for most countries. In Australia, a quality report is prepared by a member of an independent quality assurance panel.

In Scotland, the standard-setting organisation conducts internal quality assurance (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2018). The qualification development process in Singapore is supported by a quality assurance framework, but no further details were found (Renold et al. 2016). In South Africa, the Quality Council for Trades & Occupations appoints a development-quality partner and an assessment-quality partner to verify the materials developed by the qualification development facilitator (Quality Council for Trades & Occupations 2014). In Finland, quality assurance during the development stage was not clear, but ‘working life’ committees (similar to IRCs) and VET providers have overall responsibility for the quality of qualifications (Cedefop & Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). In New Zealand, the regulator evaluates the quality of applications to list qualifications at levels 1–6 (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2016).

How long does development take and when can delivery of qualifications begin?

Information on the length of time required for the qualification development process is not publicly available for most of the countries. Australia is the only country with detailed information available. A breakdown of each step in the process in Australia indicates that development can take anywhere from one to four-and-a-half years (Fyusion 2018). The overall development process in Finland is reported to take one to two years, while in England the new approval process for higher technical qualifications is scheduled to take place over one year (Cedefop & Finnish National Agency for Education 2019; Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education 2020).

Information on the length of time between qualification approval and when the qualification is first delivered is not available for most countries examined. In Australia, this period was reported to be anywhere between one and three years (Fyusion 2018), but the Standards for RTOs stipulate that delivery of superseded qualifications must cease within 12 months. The only other country where this information has been reported is England, where one year is allowed for providers to organise new materials and begin delivering qualifications.

Dealing with stakeholders with low or no participation

To ensure qualifications are of high quality and meet the needs of many stakeholders, consultations with a variety of interest groups, such as employers, employees and educators, are common in the qualification development processes of the various countries explored. However, it is important to ensure the groups are appropriately represented. The countries reviewed embed requirements to ensure the meaningful participation of stakeholders during consultation processes:

- In New Zealand, evidence of support for the qualification by the relevant stakeholder groups needs to be included with the submissions at both approval stages. If a stakeholder is not supportive, the developer must justify why the work has continued (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2016).
- In Scotland, if participation by stakeholders is considered low, the standard-setting organisation must use different consultation methods to improve engagement (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2018).
- In South Africa, attendance at meetings is recorded and any inactive participants are reported to the quality-development partner and the Quality Council for Trades & Occupations so that additional stakeholders can be arranged and to ensure that each stakeholder group is represented (Quality Council for Trades & Occupations 2014).
- In Canada, digital access to the apprenticeship standards-development process is required to promote accessibility for all stakeholders, for example, video meeting attendance (Red Seal 2020).

LESSONS FOR AUSTRALIA

Educators and educational institutions are readily involved in the qualification development process overseas

What are the key differences between Australia and the selected countries?

In the comparison between Australia's qualification development processes and those of selected international countries, the following observations can be made:

- The focus of the qualification development processes of all countries was overwhelmingly on the production of quality training standards. Few countries examined had explicit timelines for development, although some, like New Zealand, did provide timeline guides.
- No comparable international process appears more efficient or effective than Australia's, but elements of the development processes of some countries have the potential to be adapted to benefit Australian qualification development where a need for improvement has been identified.
- In many of the countries examined, the regulator is involved in the final approval of qualifications; however, in Australia, this task falls to an industry body, with final endorsement by skills ministers.

Where are the opportunities to create efficiency?

- The Australian model supports multiple steps for consultation (four) during the qualification development process, reflecting the need to build stakeholder consensus in a federated system. Further research that examines how the collaborative and conflict resolution practices of the various development and consultation groups may lead to development delays would be informative.
- Many of the countries investigated only have one stage for approval, which is delegated to a particular organisation with authority, such as the regulator or an industry-led body, which approves qualifications related to its own sector. In Australia, the case for endorsement is reviewed by state and territory governments and the Commonwealth Government, after which the AISC approves cases for endorsement to progress to skills minister. Implementation of new or updated qualifications only progresses after final approval from the skills ministers. In countries where a similar federation of state-level jurisdictions exists, attempts to set national training standards are limited to key trade occupations. However, the value placed on occupational mobility in Australia makes it important for the system to consider where efficiencies can be made rather than moving away from national accreditation.
- Although not related to the literature, a COVID-19 subcommittee of the AISC was established in April 2020 to 'enable short-term and urgent adjustments to be made rapidly to qualifications' (p.1). An investigation of how that rapid process worked effectively could inform efficiency gains in the business-as-usual approval process (Council of Australian Governments Skills Council 2020).

Other ways to address emerging skill needs

The move to streamlining the qualification development process in Australia is tied to the requirement for a more rapid response to the changing skill needs of industry. Given that the training package development process in Australia is on par with the processes in other countries and is based on a consensus model, which demands time, are there other ways by which skill needs could be more quickly addressed?

- Accredited courses sit alongside training packages in the Australian VET system and must be approved by the ASQA, TAC (WA) or VRQA (Vic.). These courses can be useful in addressing those emerging training needs not covered by training package qualifications. While accredited courses may be developed by anyone, they can only be delivered by RTOs, and must meet the Standards for VET Accredited Courses 2012. The entire process for developing an accredited course takes around 12 to 18 months (Australian Skills Quality Authority 2020). Scotland has a similar process, whereby awarding bodies, such as VET providers, can develop their own qualifications and arrange for their approval for delivery by SQA Accreditation in instances where no current qualification products meet their needs. What can be learned from the accredited course approval experience to bring efficiency to the training package development process?

- Skill sets are short courses comprising accredited units of competency. Training package skill sets are identified by IRCs and are nationally recognised, but any accredited units can be combined and delivered by RTOs to meet an industry need. All units of competency are obliged to undergo rigorous development and approval processes as part of qualification approval and offer a quality-assured method of addressing specific skills needs quickly. Unpublished NCVET analysis indicates that a large volume of non-nationally recognised skill sets already exists, these most often being used to meet regulatory or licensing needs. In some cases, such ad hoc skill sets may fill emerging skills needs while a qualification is being updated.

- Other countries, such as Finland and the Netherlands, take a modular approach to the training system, as Australia does, but emphasise units rather than qualifications as the central product. The Netherlands supports optional modules, which are jointly developed by companies and educational institutions to respond quickly to emerging skill needs or regional needs, have the capacity to be revised every three months and be delivered to students immediately (Wibrow & Waugh 2020). Finland has around 3200 modules available for 164 qualifications, which learners are able to combine to suit their individual needs (Wibrow & Waugh 2020).

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