



INDEPENDENT
HIGHER EDUCATION
AUSTRALIA

IHEA SUBMISSION

**PERMANENTLY EMBED
UNDERGRADUATE CERTIFICATES IN
THE AUSTRALIAN QUALIFICATIONS
FRAMEWORK (AQF)**

31 May 2024

IHEA Submission

Permanently Embed Undergraduate Certificates in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA) is providing feedback to the Department of Education to support Undergraduate Certificates being permanently embedded in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

Introduction

When the Higher Education Relief Package was rolled out during COVID–19, the funding of six–month, short courses created opportunities for employment for students and long–term benefits to the economy. The most important aspect of the short course proposal was the agreement by the Commonwealth and States and Territories to include the undergraduate short course qualification in the AQF as an ‘Undergraduate Certificate’. This arrangement is in place until 30 June 2025.

Inclusion of the Undergraduate Certificate in the AQF provides students with the opportunity to complete a nationally recognised qualification in a short period of time, as well as providing relevant, industry–specific skills. This fundamental change to the qualifications landscape ensured greater recognition of the short course qualification by employers and attracted many more students to embark on a tertiary education journey.

These courses also assist with attrition issues for students who, for reasons of life events or course selection decisions, would otherwise withdraw from study with no qualification, whilst having accumulated an unnecessary and financially burdensome HELP debt. Studying to attain an Undergraduate Certificate supports the ability of people to be lifelong learners and access necessary upskilling and reskilling to achieve their goals and ensure they are competitive in an evolving job market.

Importance of Undergraduate Certificates

There are many benefits of short courses being formally recognised as an Undergraduate Certificate qualification. They provide an introduction to higher education for students who may otherwise be deterred from taking such a step and upon completion, the student has a qualification, which can occur within six months if studied full–time. The shorter duration than other higher education qualifications makes them accessible to those who haven’t previously studied (or considered studying) higher education.

Further, many students new to higher education find the entry requirements for Undergraduate Certificates more accessible than those of higher level qualifications. A significant benefit is that students can embark on an Undergraduate Certificate as a pathway to further higher education qualifications, which may be an associate degree or a bachelor’s degree in a related field – the credits earned during the Undergraduate Certificate can count towards the future degree if the student has the aptitude and aspiration to continue studying. Alternatively, entering or re–entering the workforce following the completion of an Undergraduate Certificate provides the student with a nationally recognised qualification.

Undergraduate Certificates are designed to address the needs of specific industries. During the COVID–19 pandemic, the Australian Government introduced these certificates specifically to stimulate the economy and provide workers with relevant skills through professional development. This will be even more important as we look to a future that will require lifelong learning to be at the forefront of our educational settings to enable access to microcredentials to skill, upskill and re–skill.

Lifelong learning and microcredentials

A significant advantage of Undergraduate Certificates is that they offer a flexible and efficient way to gain valuable qualifications, commence a higher education journey and prepare for further study or employment opportunities. The Accord Final Report speaks of the importance of lifelong learning and microcredentials to meeting workforce challenges now and into the future.

Specifically, the Final Report identifies a key area for review is about how Australia meets its knowledge and skills needs now and in the future is important. This will be important to "enhance the delivery of quality education that meets the needs of students across all stages of lifelong learning and develop the skills needed now, and in the future. This will include recommendations for new targets and reforms recognising that more than 9 in 10 new jobs will require post-school qualifications, and fifty per cent of new jobs are expected to require a bachelor degree or higher" (p.310, Accord Final Report).

With expectations that over the coming decades, Australian workers will frequently change jobs and tasks within jobs, we will need a flexible and adaptable education system that will enable people to update their skills over the course of their working lives. This will be critical to Australians achieving their ambitions and becoming appropriately qualified to stay employed, and for employers and the economy to have people appropriately skilled and trained to support the jobs of the future.

Microcredentials, of which an Undergraduate Certificate aptly qualifies, are important to supporting upskilling and re-skilling in short timeframes to meet emerging jobs. Therefore, it is important that short courses continue to be included in the AQF as an Undergraduate Certificate, which will deliver substance to the dialogue in the Accord Final Report by ensuring that the policy settings are being put in place to support access to microcredentials as a vehicle to enable lifelong learning.

As stated in the Accord Final Report, it will be paramount "to deliver new options for lifelong learning and to encourage higher education participation from new cohorts, the Australian Government move toward funding a set of microcredentials as a new element in the system of Commonwealth supported places, initially in areas of employer demand and national priority" (p.19, Accord Final Report). Embedding the Undergraduate Certificate as a recognised qualification in the AQF does exactly that and is an easily achievable and decisive step in the right direction.

That direction is specified in the Accord Final Report via Recommendations 5 and 6a which call for "modular, stackable" courses that "involve minimum volumes of learning and can be stacked to a full qualification" (p. 19). This aptly justifies the permanent inclusion of the Undergraduate Certificate in the AQF since it serves as a vehicle through which a student's studies can be "combined or built upon to form larger qualifications where they constitute a larger body of structured and coherent knowledge" (p. 96, Accord Final Report).

Recommendation

Extending undergraduate short course qualification in the AQF as an 'Undergraduate Certificate' requires a decision of Commonwealth and State and Territory education ministers at an Education Ministers' Meeting (EMM). As a first step, IHEA understands that the Department of Education is undertaking a review to inform advice to the Commonwealth Minister for Education the Hon Jason Clare MP. IHEA has asked for stakeholders to be consulted as part of this review and the feedback in this document supports the review.

IHEA is calling on the permanent inclusion of Undergraduate Certificates in the AQF, which will afford students the opportunity to complete a nationally recognised qualification in a short period of time that can provide relevant, industry-specific skills. The consequence of this not occurring is that the value of this qualification will be diminished and devalued in the marketplace, despite the very strong outcomes that have been achieved to date. HEA recommends that advice be put to EMM as soon as possible to ensure minimal disruption to this important and necessary educational and qualification credential and pathway to further learning.

Who We Are

Independent Higher Education Australia Ltd. (IHEA) is a peak body established in 2001 to represent Australian independent (private sector) higher education institutions. Our membership spans independent universities, university colleges and other institutes of higher education, all of which are registered higher education providers accredited by the national higher education regulator, TEQSA or associate members seeking registration.

Our Vision is that: students, domestic and international, have open and equitable access to world class independent higher education in Australia, built on the foundations of equity, choice, and diversity.

Our Mission is to represent independent higher education and promote recognition and respect of independent providers as they contribute to Australian education, the Australian economy, and to society in general. We achieve this by promoting continuous improvement of academic and quality standards within member institutions, by advocating equity for their staff and students, and by delivering services that further strengthen independent providers' reputations as innovative, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of industry and other relevant stakeholders in both higher education and vocational education and training. IHEA's commitment is to excellence, productivity and growth in independent higher education being delivered through a trusted Australian education system underpinned by equity, choice, and diversity.

IHEA members have different missions, scales, and course offerings across the full AQF range (Diplomas to Doctorates). Members comprise:

- Four private universities (Bond University, Torrens University, University of Divinity, Avondale University).
- Five University Colleges (Alphacrucis University College, Moore Theological College, Australian College of Theology, Sydney College of Divinity and SAE Institute).
- A further seventy four not-for-profit and for-profit institutions of higher education; and related corporate entities.

IHEA members teach approximately 74 percent of the students in the independent sector (i.e., more than 130,000 students) and educate students in a range of disciplines, including law, agricultural science, architecture, business, accounting, tourism and hospitality, education, health sciences, theology, creative arts, information technology, human services and social sciences.

IHEA holds a unique position in higher education as a representative peak body of higher education providers. Membership in IHEA is only open to providers registered, or seeking registration, with the Australian regulator – TEQSA. However, some IHEA members are dual and multi-sector providers who also deliver VET and/or English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) courses.

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