

**Australian Education Union  
2010 National TAFE Council AGM**

**Keynote Address  
John Dawkins Chair AQF Council  
Sunday 17 January 2010**

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in your National TAFE Council Annual Meeting.

You have heard this weekend about the vision that the Bradley Review on Higher Education has presented to the Government on what is being described as the 'tertiary sector'. This vision as it becomes realised provides opportunities for greater communication between the VET and higher education components of the sector that can only provide advantages for students.

Increased transparency of qualifications pathways, greater connections between qualifications themselves and also better quality processes can only add to Australia's reputation for a world class qualification system.

The Australian Qualifications Framework has demonstrated since it was established in 1995 that it is a critical component of this world class system.

As you are aware through the contributions you have made over the last few months, the AQF Council, that I chair, has been given the responsibility from MCTEE to provide it with advice on strategic strengthening of the AQF to:

- improve national consistency and contemporary relevance
- improve national and international portability
- improve flexible qualification linkages and pathways in education and training within and across all sectors
- improve recognition of non-formal and informal learning
- ensure national and international recognition and comparability of qualification standards
- ensure alignment of qualifications standards / frameworks, and
- take into account relevant national and international issues and their implications for national qualifications policy.

The AQF Council's vision is to ensure Australia has a nationally and internationally recognised framework of qualifications that meets the current and future needs of students and employers.

Of particular interest to you are three key areas of our work:

- strengthening the 'architecture' of the AQF and compliance with the AQF
- facilitating pathways (including credit transfer and articulation), and
- enabling the international recognition and portability of qualifications.

This work is happening at the same time that governments are implementing new regulatory environments for both VET and higher education.

The Council has been considering how the AQF can support a more seamless and easily navigable tertiary sector to ensure it continues to be nationally and internationally robust and responsive to the challenges we face.

Outcomes for students are both yours and my concerns.

During 2009, the Council consulted widely on proposals to redefine the AQF as a 10 level structure with much better defined qualification descriptors. These proposals have been accompanied by stronger policies on issuance of qualifications and credit transfer and recognition of prior learning as well as new policies regarding addition and deletion of qualifications from the framework.

The response from all education sectors has indicated that users of the AQF within the sectors support these moves and I thank you for your contributions, as a Union and also individually through your institutions and as individuals in some cases.

A strong AQF will build confidence in qualification outcomes, improve student pathways both within and between the education sectors and the workplace, enhance the mobility of graduates through increased recognition of the value of Australian qualifications and enable Australian qualifications to be mapped against those of other countries. The proposed revisions to the AQF underpin these outcomes.

Together we need to ensure that we continue to build strong connections between the components of the tertiary sector – higher education and vocational education and training.

Regardless of whether the tertiary sector is defined as ‘diversified’ or ‘seamless’, it is critical to ensure that there are strong connections between, and within, the system.

As the Deputy Prime Minister said recently, ‘Australia’s vocational and academic systems must be able to speak a common language. They must work together to address Australia’s knowledge economy needs and they must be able to develop easier pathways between each system for Australia’s students.’

The Pathways Project commissioned four research papers to provide comprehensive information on existing practices and arguments for future reform. The final report of the project is now with the Deputy Prime Minister and we are waiting to hear about future actions as a result of the project’s findings.

Without giving too much away about the conclusions of the Pathways Project, the following describes some of the findings of the research papers prepared for the Project.

Our task has been to investigate how students can more easily receive guaranteed levels of credit and to ensure that qualifications actually identify and support student pathways through their learning journeys.

The research papers provided valuable insights into funding, policy and regulatory issues, data collection and good practice programs and pathways. The Council may release these research papers in the future.

What we have been told is that Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas are central to making pathways actually happen between VET and higher education. However the pathways need to be in several directions:

- access to Diplomas from lower level qualifications in VET
- access from Diplomas in VET to higher education qualifications, and
- access to Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas in VET from higher education.

The construction of pathways is critical – they need to be constructed to ensure that there is educational as well as occupational progression.

We know that there is considerable overlap between the VET and higher education sectors – they both prepare students for work in similar kinds of occupations, even sometimes competing for the same positions. Research by the NCVET tells us that the ‘fit’ between qualifications and occupations is quite loose and perhaps the outcomes of qualifications in VET are much more generic than the competencies identified in training packages might suggest. The qualifications for trades and other regulated occupations would be exceptions.<sup>1</sup>

As one of our research papers concluded, qualifications in the tertiary sector need to prepare students for a much broader range of workplace contexts than they do at the moment. I believe that Pat Forward spoke to you yesterday about the need to provide options for students – having access to options that enable real choice is critical if the pathways students plan to follow in their education and training journey are to be meaningful to them and society.

Pathways policy needs to include opportunities for progression for students from disadvantaged backgrounds from lower level qualifications to higher level qualifications in VET.

Previous NCVET and other research has also told us that students with higher level qualifications are more likely to have secure employment, higher rates of pay and more access to training at work – we therefore need to ensure that the opportunities to obtain these higher level qualifications, and the benefits that follow, exist for all students.

As one of our consultants reminded us, access to education is important not just because of its contribution to the labour market, it is also important because it contributes to social inclusion and we will be judged by the extent to which our educational system engages Australians in learning, particularly the most socially disadvantaged, so that they can take advantage of these opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

The research has also told us that there are many policy, institutional, program and curricular implications that need to be resolved if pathways are to achieve these objectives.

There are, of course, many existing examples of good practice in developing pathways for students between the sectors. We need to build on these so they become the norm rather than the exceptions.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Karmel and others 2008 *Is VET vocational? The relevance of training to the occupations of vocational education and training graduates* NCVET

<sup>2</sup> Leesa Wheelahan research paper for Pathways Project

Many of these examples are built on the trust developed between individual academics supported by their institutions, mechanisms for recognising VET qualifications for entry to higher education and bi-lateral arrangements for the provision of credit for previous study. Trust will continue to be an important factor in creating stronger pathways and it is enhanced by:

- Strengthening the architecture of the AQF so that all qualifications have common features
- Introducing greater consistency in the regulation of VET and higher education providers, both private and public
- Auditing for quality to ensure that providers are delivering qualifications to required standards.

One of the features of the strengthened AQF is to build a framework that is based on non-sector based qualifications, described by a common taxonomy of learning outcomes but recognising that accreditation remains within the sectors until the new national regulatory body for VET and higher education is established.

The work of the Council of course has a qualifications focus rather than a unit or module level focus and the direction that the Council has commenced during 2009 to strengthen the AQF reflects this focus.

We are strengthening the AQF to provide greater certainty in the relationships between qualifications and volume of learning for each qualification at particular levels.

A credit model embedded in the AQF and strengthened policy requirements will be a feature of the revised AQF. The details of these requirements of the AQF will be informed by the outcomes from the Pathways Project.

We also need stronger policy that involves all stakeholders in VET and higher education: industry, Training Package developers, professional associations and, most importantly, TAFE teachers such as you – who are critical to helping students develop their aspirations and to developing coherent and supportive pathways<sup>3</sup>.

The solutions will require building confidence and trust between institutions, implementing targeted strategies (such as more explicit pathways in the AQF) and encouraging adoption of best practice.

This will lead to enhanced confidence that graduates of Australian qualifications possess the necessary skills and abilities to succeed at higher levels of learning. It is this confidence that is essential to expanding current good practice across all providers of tertiary education and training.

Forums such as this will help develop the conversations between practitioners to ensure that there is always confidence and trust in Australia's qualifications.

Thank you.

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<sup>3</sup> Leesa Wheelahan research paper for Pathways Project