



Guidance Note: *Determining Equivalence of Professional Experience and Academic Qualifications*

How is equivalence of professional experience determined?

Higher education students are entitled to expect that they are being taught by someone who is qualified in the particular field of education (also known as field of study) at a level more advanced than the level of the course being taught, and that the teacher's expertise has been clearly established through an assessment of formal academic qualifications, equivalent professional experience, or a combination of both.

Where providers identify a need to rely on an assessment of professional equivalence for the purpose of appointing staff, TEQSA expects that they will have a policy and procedure under which professional equivalence is determined and approved.

Relevant Standards in the HES Framework

The Standards in the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (HES Framework) concerned with staffing require registered higher education providers to ensure that academic staff appointed to teach students are appropriately qualified in the relevant discipline for their level of teaching (see Section 3.2). In particular, the Standards specify that academic teaching staff must be qualified to at least one level¹ of qualification higher than the course of study being taught (AQF+1), or have equivalent relevant academic, professional or practice-based experience and expertise, except for staff who are supervising doctoral degrees, who must have a doctoral degree or equivalent research experience (see Section 3.2.3). The Standards for research (Section 4.1) and research training (Section 4.2) also canvass experience. TEQSA's guidance note on nested courses discusses how the requirements apply to courses at one level that have components within them of courses at a lower level.

This guidance note explains how TEQSA assesses whether providers have met the requirement to determine equivalence in line with the HES Framework, where staff do not have AQF+1 qualifications. For the sake of brevity, the range of relevant types of experience mentioned in the Standards is referred to collectively as 'professional experience' in this guidance note.

¹ 'Level' means an AQF level or equivalent.

Assessing professional equivalence

Key features of an effective policy

A framework for determining equivalent professional experience needs to be codified in a policy, to avoid inconsistent and ad hoc judgements being made. Equivalent professional experience goes well beyond a measure of the time spent by a person working in a particular profession. Assessment must also take into account how the professional experience demonstrates achievement that is equivalent to the specific knowledge and skills established in the learning outcomes of the required AQF level being considered. A provider's policy and procedures should recognise that these learning outcomes are specific for each field of education, as well as AQF level, and that therefore the criteria for equivalence would need to be tailored to each field and level of education under consideration.

A provider may find it useful to benchmark the knowledge and skills that can be attained through professional experience against the learning outcomes of its own courses, or against those of other providers.

In addition, any policy dealing with the assessment of professional equivalence should include consideration of:

- 4 the full range of professional experience
 - 4 including teaching experience (i.e. teaching at lower AQF levels, conducting professional development seminars, giving public lectures), scholarship and professional practice
- 4 a minimum requirement for academic qualification(s)
 - 4 for example where staff are able to meet the AQF+1 requirement through professional experience, they could be required nonetheless to hold an academic qualification at least equivalent to the AQF level of the course of study being (or proposed to be) taught, and
- 4 the specific criteria for assessing professional equivalence at each level
 - 4 where a policy points to multiple criteria, the policy should be clear about whether each criterion is sufficient on its own, or is to be assessed in combination with others.

The evidence to be considered when assessing the professional experience of an individual may include evidence of:

- 4 leadership in the development of professional standards
- 4 performing in a role that requires high order judgement and the provision of expert advice, or roles at a senior level
- 4 managing significant projects in the field
- 4 testimonials, awards or other recognition that acknowledges leadership or expertise in the field of education
- 4 contributions in the field of education through participation in advisory boards and professional networks
- 4 peer reviewed publications in the field of education
- 4 other publications such as books and reports, and

4 leadership or management of research acknowledged by peers.

TEQSA recognises that in fields of education that are professionally focused, emergent academic disciplines or highly professional specialist subjects within a discipline, a policy may allow for some flexibility in its application while maintaining the robustness of the policy intent. However, TEQSA would expect that where an individual staff member may not yet strongly meet all of the criteria outlined in the policy, there would be an explicit and time-limited professional development plan, or other strategies put in place such as mentoring or team teaching, to enable the individual to make the transition to academic teaching successfully. In the case where teachers are engaged on a continuing basis to teach specialised components of a course because of their specialised expertise, but do not fully meet the general requirements of Standard 3.2.3, they are supervised by staff who do meet the requirements (see Standard 3.2.4).

Assessing research equivalence

In the case of staff supervising doctoral degree students who do not themselves have a doctoral degree, TEQSA would expect a higher education provider to analyse the nature, amount and duration of research previously undertaken, including the extent of independent research involved, against the usual requirements for the award of the relevant research qualification e.g. PhD. Such an analysis would be expected to be undertaken by a person or a body, e.g. a research committee, that has sufficient research experience to make an informed judgement about equivalence.

Risks to Quality

The focus of the Standards relating staffing is to avoid students being taught by inexperienced and/or underqualified staff, particularly staff whose level of qualifications, teaching and professional/practical experience is at or below the level of course they are teaching (including research experience for research training if applicable to the provider).

Where staff do not have the required level of qualifications and experience, they may be unable to lead students in intellectual inquiry and achieve learning outcomes appropriate for the level of the course.

What TEQSA will look for

This part of the guidance note covers the full extent of the Standards, and corresponding evidence that TEQSA may require, in relation to professional equivalence.

For new applicants seeking initial registration and course accreditation, TEQSA will require evidence to be provided in relation to all relevant Standards.

For existing providers, the scope of Standards to be assessed and the evidence required may vary. This is consistent with the regulatory principles in the TEQSA Act, under which TEQSA has discretion to vary the scope of its assessments and the related evidence required. In exercising this discretion, TEQSA will be guided by the provider's regulatory history, its risk profile and its track record in delivering high quality higher education.

TEQSA's case managers will discuss with providers the scope of assessments and evidence required well ahead of the due date for submitting an application.

The evidence required for particular types of application is available from the Application Guides on the TEQSA website.

TEQSA recognises that approaches to assessing professional equivalence are likely to vary between providers, but in establishing the effectiveness of the implementation of the policy framework, a provider should be able to demonstrate:

- 4 how the policy is communicated to current and future academic teaching staff and to human resource staff
- 4 who is delegated to apply the policy, and that there are processes for ensuring transparency and equity in relation to its application.
- 4 how the provider assures itself that the policy is applied to all existing staff, as well as new appointments
- 4 how the outcomes of any assessment of professional equivalence may inform a staff member's professional development activities, and
- 4 how the policy will be subject to a periodic review.

Resources and references

Australian Qualifications Framework Council (2013), *Australian Qualifications Framework Second Edition January 2013*, <<http://www.aqf.edu.au/>>.

TEQSA (2016), *Explanations of terms in Part A of the HES Framework 2015*, <<http://www.teqsa.gov.au/explanations-hes-framework-terms>>.

TEQSA (2016), *Guidance Note on Nested Courses of Study*, <<http://www.teqsa.gov.au/hesf-2015-specific-guidance-notes>>.

TEQSA (2016), *Guidance Note on Staffing, Learning Resources and Educational Support*, <<http://www.teqsa.gov.au/hesf-2015-specific-guidance-notes>>.

Version #	Date	Key changes
1.0	18 September 2014	
2.0	19 August 2016	Updated for the HESF 2015 and made available as beta version for consultation. Replaces previous guidance note on 'Equivalence of professional experience to academic qualifications'.
2.1	18 April 2017	Updated to refer to guidance note on Nested Courses.