



Guidance Note: *Nested Courses of Study*

What do ‘nested’ courses of study encompass?

‘Nested courses’ is not a term used in the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (HES Framework), but in this context is interpreted to mean a set of courses of study that are offered sequentially and can lead to qualifications at different AQF levels. Courses at the lower qualification levels are described as ‘nested’ within the courses leading to qualifications at the higher levels (as represented in Figure 1 below). Nested courses are typically offered by a single provider but could be offered through a third-party arrangement (see separate guidance note on third-party arrangements).

This note focuses solely on coursework, but nesting arrangements are also found in higher degrees by research in some specific circumstances.

Figure 1 - A diagrammatic representation of nested courses of study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.



Differing models of student participation

A nested arrangement of courses and qualifications potentially enables multiple entry and exit points for students. Students may exit with a qualification at one of the lower levels after completing a defined subset of the total program. They may also enter at different levels depending on their prior experience or qualifications in the field of study and the provider’s requirements for recognition of prior learning.

Students who are admitted in the first instance only to a lower level course and complete that course successfully, will be granted a defined amount of credit towards admission into the higher courses. In a three-stage program which contains exit points at the end of each stage, this would typically entail one third credit being granted for completion of each level.

However, students who are enrolled directly into the higher course at the outset are not granted credit for completion of each level. Instead, they normally proceed through the entire program of study just like any other non-nested course of study, unless they change their plans and decide to exit at a lower level.

The first scenario (enrolment in a lower level) can be referred to as an 'opt-in' model, and the second (enrolling for the highest level at the outset) can be referred to as an 'opt-out' model. The nature and requirements of the model chosen must be made fully transparent to prospective and current students.

Relevant Standards in the HES Framework

The Standards that are primarily concerned with nested courses of study are the same as those that apply to all individual courses of study that lead to the award of a higher education qualification that is recognised in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). These are the Standards in Domain 1 (Student Participation and Attainment), Domain 2 (Learning Environment), Domain 3 (Teaching) and, if applicable to the provider, Domain 4 (Research and Research Training).

The Standards apply to all of the nested components individually where they *may* lead to the award of a qualification, even if the qualification is not awarded because a student decides to continue with a higher course of study rather than exit with a lower qualification.

The requirements for institutional approval of courses (Section 5.1 Course Approval and Accreditation) apply equally to scrutiny and approval of nested arrangements, through the provider's peak academic governance bodies. This applies whether or not a provider has self-accrediting authority.

Intent of the Standards

The intent of the Standards is to ensure that the requirements of the HES Framework for admission, recognition of prior learning, orientation and progression, achievement of learning outcomes and award of qualifications are met, irrespective of which level of study is undertaken and which qualification may be awarded. The requirements for the learning environment, course design, staffing, learning resources and educational support also apply to every component of a nested program.

Each course of study within a nested set that may lead to an AQF qualification must meet the requirements of all of the relevant Standards in its own right, irrespective of any nesting arrangement. This includes the requirement that all qualifications that are awarded are consistent with the level classification of the qualifications in the AQF.

For example, it follows that in the nested programs illustrated in Figure 1:

- 4 the course of study leading to the Bachelor or Master degree must have specified expected learning outcomes that are consistent with the level classification of the AQF for a Bachelor or Master degree
- 4 the course of study leading to the Associate Degree or Graduate Diploma must have specified expected learning outcomes that are consistent with the level classification of the AQF for Associate Degree or Graduate Diploma

- 4 the course of study leading to the Diploma or Graduate Certificate must have specified expected learning outcomes that are consistent with the level classification of the AQF for Diploma or Graduate Certificate.

Risks to Quality

There are many examples of successful nested arrangements. They are however vulnerable to a variety of risks, including where:

- 4 the integrity, coherency, overall level of study, or learning outcomes of the courses leading to qualifications awarded at the higher and highest levels of study are compromised or diluted by excessive lower-level material
- 4 students who complete the requirements of a lower level and then decide to proceed to higher levels are not sufficiently prepared to undertake the higher level of study
- 4 lower level components are ill conceived to achieve both of their two possible roles; either a coherent terminating course of study leading to the award of an appropriate qualification or an effective preparation for continuing study at a higher level
- 4 the course leading to the highest level of study is not conceived as a coherent whole, but is a collection of unrelated parts, thus degrading the qualification awarded
- 4 excessive or inappropriate award of credit for prior learning that compromises the integrity of the course(s) and/or disadvantages the students concerned - this risk mainly arises where credit is awarded for a qualification completed at a third party provider (refer to the guidelines in The Australian Qualifications Framework (second edition 2013) Pathways Policy section 2.1.10 as a reference point).
- 4 teaching staff in lower levels are not sufficiently qualified and experienced to lead students who will be progressing to higher levels, or
- 4 cohorts of students with differing learning needs (e.g. planning to exit at a lower level versus continuing to higher levels) are taught jointly, leading to the different learning outcomes not being met for some students.

Such adverse outcomes may jeopardise the TEQSA accreditation of a course(s) of study.

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 nested courses of study.

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 will need to be satisfied that each and every nested component of the course of study meets the requirements of the HES Framework as a stand-alone course and that any combination of nested elements meets the requirements of the HES Framework especially for the highest level of study and qualification awarded. The provider needs to demonstrate that students who are enrolled in a lower course at the outset, but have the option of continuing on to complete the higher courses in the nested set, achieve the learning outcomes for their initial course in the first instance, while at the same time positioning themselves to achieve the learning outcomes for courses leading to awards at higher levels if they proceed through the nested sequence. This applies regardless of whether the course conforms to an opt-in model or an opt-out model.

TEQSA will need to be confident that the inclusion of subjects and subject elements at lower levels does not undermine the integrity of the highest level of course being delivered. This issue goes to the level of each subject, its content, its teaching staff and its assessment. The greater the proportion of subjects with learning outcomes that are below the AQF level for the higher course, the greater the risk that the higher course will not meet the HES Framework requirements for course accreditation.

In assessing a course proposal, TEQSA needs to be able to see clearly where each of the learning outcomes for each course is taught and assessed, and that the learning outcomes are consistent with the level of study and the highest level of qualification involved. Where providers are presenting nested courses for assessment, it will be of assistance to TEQSA if an explanation and/or mapping is provided that shows where and how course learning outcomes are addressed and assessed throughout the entire program.

The HES Framework requires that staff who have oversight of and teach in a course of study must be qualified to at least one level higher than the course of study being taught or have equivalent relevant professional experience. TEQSA interprets 'the course' to mean the entire

course put forward for accreditation in an opt-out model. Therefore, the first year of an opt-out nested bachelor course should be taught by staff with at least an AQF level 8 qualification (or equivalent) and the first year of an opt-out nested Masters course should be taught by staff with a doctorate (or equivalent). Where equivalent professional experience is claimed, the provider should have formal criteria for evaluating this (see TEQSA's guidance note on determining equivalence of professional experience and academic qualifications).

In the case of a purely opt-in model nested suite of courses, where all incoming students are enrolled initially in, for example, an AQF 8 level course, classes composed exclusively of students currently enrolled in an AQF 8 level course (e.g. Graduate Diploma, Graduate Certificate) could be taught by staff qualified at AQF 9 level (or higher), or equivalent. If a provider elected to mix opt-in and opt-out models and teach students enrolled at different levels within the one class, the teaching staff would need to have AQF 10 level qualifications or equivalent.

Applicants may be admitted into any of these courses on the basis of prior academic achievement, or in some cases equivalent professional experience. Where admission is on the basis of professional experience, providers must have reason for their confidence that students will be able to achieve the academic standards required; bearing in mind that professional experience may not always equip applicants with the requisite academic study skills.

Where applicants are admitted to any of these courses with advanced standing based on prior academic achievement, to maintain the integrity of their course the provider must be able to demonstrate to TEQSA that it has taken into account the comparability and equivalence of the learning outcomes, volume of learning, program of study (including content and learning and assessment approaches), with those of the provider's own course.

Above all, the provider must be able to demonstrate that all students admitted to any course have sufficient grounding in knowledge and skills to be able to achieve the learning outcomes of each course in the time available, taking into consideration the course design. Students must be required to and have sufficient grounding to complete all the units that are necessary for them to achieve the course learning outcomes, given their potentially different starting points in prior knowledge and skills.

Because of the variety of possible nested arrangements, providers are advised to consult with a case manager at TEQSA when contemplating such arrangements.

Resources and references

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

Australian Qualifications Framework Council, *Addendum to the AQF Second Edition January 2013: Amended Qualification Type: Masters Degree*, May 2014 (replaces pages 59-62 of the *AQF Second Edition January 2013*), <<http://www.aqf.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/AQF-Addendum-2014.pdf>>.

Australian Qualifications Framework Council (November 2012), *Clustered Qualifications: An Explanation*, <<http://www.aqf.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Clustered-Qualifications-Explanation.pdf>>.

Australian Qualifications Framework Council (November 2012), *Proportion of Components of a Qualification at a Level: An Explanation*, <<http://www.aqf.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Components-of-a-Qualification-Explanation.pdf>>.

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 Notes on Course Design, Learning Outcomes and Assessment and on Determining Equivalence of Professional Experience and Academic Qualifications*, <<http://www.teqsa.gov.au/hesf-2015-specific-guidance-notes>>.

Version #	Date	Key changes
1.0	March 2013	
2.0	19 August 2016	Updated for the HESF 2015 and made available as beta version for consultation.

Consultation
Draft