# Guidance Note: *Course Design*

Version 3.1 (DD MM 2021)

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| Providers should note that Guidance Notes are intended to provide guidance only. The definitive instruments for regulatory purposes remain the TEQSA Act and the Higher Education Standards Framework as amended from time to time. |

## What does Course Design encompass?

In the context of the [*Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2022C00105/Html/Text)(Threshold Standards), course design encompasses the methodology, structure and policies used to develop a course of study.

The primary obligations around course design are found in Section 3.1 of the Threshold Standards. Other standards relevant to course design are overarching and cover several topics included in other guidance notes. These are:

* learning outcomes and assessment (Section 1.4) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* staffing (Section 3.2) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* learning resources and educational support (Section 3.3) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* If warranted by the course level, appropriate regard for research and research training (Section 4.2) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* course approval and accreditation (Section 5.1). [hyperlink forthcoming]

The overall intent of the course design standards is to identify what is required in the design of a course of study that leads to a higher education qualification.

### Features of Course Design

Section 3.1.1 of the Threshold Standards provides guidance on the key features of course design. These features include the:

* qualification awarded at completion
* structure, duration, and modes of delivery
* units of study
* entry requirements and pathways
* learning outcomes, assessment, and student workload
* compulsory completion requirements
* learning pathways (e.g. further learning and exit pathways)
* proportion and nature of research or research-related study (for Bachelor Honours, Masters, and Doctoral qualifications).

While the list of features is not exhaustive, the Threshold Standards explains course design must be of sufficient detail for:

* an expert in the field to undertake an initial assessment of the course’s scope and nature
* a prospective student to make an informed choice about the course.

This applies whether the course design is prepared for accreditation by TEQSA, or for internal approval at providers with self-accrediting authority.

Having sufficient detail about course design is important in demonstrating compliance with the Threshold Standards. This is because TEQSA, and any subject matter experts it may rely on, will need this information to be satisfied the quality, content and scope of the course are compliant.

Sufficient detail about course design is also required to allow prospective students to make an informed choice about the course. This is required under sections 1.1 (Admissions) and 7.2 (Information for Prospective and Current Students). The details available should allow prospective students to form a view on the quality of the course against comparable offerings from different providers.

### Components of a Qualification

The requirements for course design included in the Threshold Standards are added to by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

The AQF explains what learning outcomes and volumes of learning must be met to achieve different levels of AQF qualification (e.g., Bachelor’s, Master’s etc.).

In accordance with the AQF, a proportion of the components of a course of study should enable students to achieve learning outcomes by developing their:

* understanding of the discipline
* knowledge
* skills (including their application).

Under the AQF, ‘components’ is defined to include modules, subjects, units of competency or units of completion, which lead to an AQF qualification.

The AQF does not specify the proportion of components a provider should include in the design of the course. However, in designing a course, a diligent provider, will consider how the proportion of components it includes will affect the:

* likelihood of a student successfully attaining an AQF qualification
* integrity of the qualification.

### Designing a program with multiple points of entry and exit at different AQF levels (nested courses)

Through course design, providers may develop and offer a course with multiple points of entry and exit at different AQF levels. These courses are made up of multiple shorter courses in the same area of study being delivered sequentially. This type of shorter qualification is often referred to as a ‘nested course’.

In a course with nested courses, the level of the qualification awarded to a student is based on their completion of a subset of the total program. In designing nested courses, a provider is expected to ensure:

* there are coherent learning outcomes for each level and qualification type
* each course enables graduates to demonstrate the learning outcomes required
* the learning outcomes of each nested course flow logically and adequately to prepare students for study at the higher level (see Figure 1).
1. A representation of undergraduate and postgraduate nested course of study

In this example, students who complete a lower-level course successfully will typically be granted credit towards admission into a higher-level course. A student can then choose to proceed further with their education and exit at a higher-level course.

Students who are directly enrolled in a higher-level course are not normally granted credit for completion at each level. Students are typically expected to complete the entire course of study unless they choose to exit at a lower AQF level.

## What TEQSA will look for

The Threshold Standards requires TEQSA to consider the following aspects of a provider’s course design.

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| **Part A: Standards for HE Providers** | **Key considerations** |
| 1.1.1: Admission | * Information about policies and arrangements for recognised prior learning are made available to prospective students.
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| 3.1.1 – 3.1.5: Course Design | * detailed information about course design is available for accreditation
* course design includes information on how learning outcomes are assessed
* content, teaching and learning activities are presented in a logical manner and aligned with relevant learning outcomes
* if professional accreditation is relevant, course design factors in how professional accreditation for the course will be maintained.
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| 3.2.1 and 3.2.2: Staffing | * there is enough staff to meet the educational, academic and administrative needs of students
* the staff for each course of study provide the necessary oversight, knowledge and teaching capacity to appropriately lead and assess students.
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| 3.3.1 and 3.3.4: Learning Resources and Educational Support | * learning resources are up to date and accessible
* students have access to learning support services, consistent with their course of study.
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| 5.1.1 and 5.1.3: Course Approval and Accreditation | * internally there are robust processes for deciding whether to approve delivery of a course of study
* a course of study is approved or accredited only when it meets the Threshold Standards, independent academic scrutiny has taken place and resources required for delivery of the course are available.
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| 7.2: Information for Prospective and Current Students  | * information about courses is available, to allow a prospective student to make an informed decision about them.
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## Identified issues

Within the context of the Threshold Standards, TEQSA has identified a range of issues which are indicative of risks to compliance regarding course design. These include, but are not limited to:

* Quality and accessibility of information:
	+ learning outcomes are poorly defined or inconsistent with the AQF
	+ learning outcomes of each subject are not credibly mappable to the learning outcomes of the course
	+ modes of participation or delivery are poorly defined leading to potential disadvantage to impacted cohorts of students
	+ other information about a course and its design is not publicly available or lacks detail to be informative for prospective and current students in deciding whether to begin a particular course of study.
* Contemporary practices/methods
	+ assessment methods do not reflect contemporary methods of teaching practice and theory
	+ assessment methods are inappropriate to discern a student’s achievement of learning outcomes
	+ failure by a provider to promote scholarly activity leading to an outdated approach to course design, methods of delivery or assessment.
* Staff
	+ staff responsible for academic oversight lack the skills or knowledge to make sound academic judgement about course design
	+ insufficient diligence in selecting methods of assessment leading to students not achieving learning outcomes
* Nested courses
	+ learning outcomes for each level and qualification type lack coherence, leading to students not demonstrating all required learning outcomes upon completion of the course
	+ misalignment of areas of study or incorrect credit arrangements whereby students do not receive credit for units successfully completed in the lower-level course/s or students receive too much credit for recognised prior learning
	+ not providing enough information to show courses in a nested course arrangement have received the appropriate approvals or oversight.

## Related Resources

* Guidance note: Learning Outcomes and Assessment (under development) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* Guidance note: Staffing (under development) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* Guidance note: Learning Resources and Educational Support (under development) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* Guidance note: Monitoring, Review and Improvement (under development) [hyperlink forthcoming]
* [Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)](https://www.aqf.edu.au/framework/aqf-levels)
* [Proportion of components of a qualification at a level](https://www.aqf.edu.au/publication/proportion-components-qualification-level)

| **Version #** | **Date** | **Key changes** |
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