

Focus on the levels

The issue over the naming of some postgraduate degrees raises important issues of diversity and competitiveness of Australian Higher Education. It also raises questions about governance: how governments regulate universities, and how much discretion universities have in offering what students want and being responsive to changing needs and circumstances. As such, it has major implications for all universities and for the regulator, the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), as well as the Australian Qualifications Framework council (AQFC).

The AQFC has made a major contribution through its focus on learning outcomes as the basis for distinguishing among the different levels of attainment represented by various qualifications. This focus on levels of learning outcomes can help students, employers and others better understand the relative worth of a qualification however and wherever it is obtained and whatever it is called.

But the AQFC council, in its July draft 'issuance policy', has proposed a restriction on the use of internationally recognised titles for degrees, which would limit postgraduate degree titles to 'Master of (field of study)' and MPhil, and 'Doctor of (field of study)' and PhD. All other titles, including many that are longstanding and funded by the Government, are no longer to be allowed. And Australian universities may be forbidden from offering internationally recognised awards in the future.

This has significant implications for several degrees with internationally recognised titles including the Juris Doctor, and Doctors of Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Optometry, Dental Surgery and Physiotherapy. Curiously, it also means the end of degree titles such as LittD, DPhil, DSc, LL.M. What's the point?

The Go8 supports a 'modernisation' of the AQF with a view to clarifying the learning outcomes expected for qualifications at different levels. The AQF is an important external reference but it has never been, nor should it become, a prescriptive regulatory tool. The role of the AQF is to describe what Australian institutions offer; not to control them. The AQF levels provide a basis for 'comparability' of qualifications, however titled. Regrettably, the AQFC confuses 'comparability' with 'consistency' or sameness or uniformity.

It is not self-evident that Australia should align itself entirely with the highly-regulated approach of the Europeans. The Australian higher education sector, post-Dawkins, resembles the North American model of diversity within universities rather than the European model of diversity through different institutional types. The North American model has currency in most parts of Asia as well as Latin America – the countries where demand for higher education is growing most. Even so, the European approach is about comparability of one nation's qualifications structure to that of another via referencing to the learning outcomes outlined for the eight levels of the European Qualifications Framework. It does not mandate common degree titles everywhere or ban variations to the general pattern. Why should the AQFC?

If the AQF is to describe accurately Australian qualifications currently offered and provide the flexibility necessary to accommodate new offerings in response to student interests and global competition, then it should allow, for instance, the title of Master's at Levels 8 and 9 and the title of Doctor at levels 9 and 10. To do otherwise is to deny the obvious, reduce student learning options and stifle Australian university competitiveness.

The AQFC argues the title "Doctor" is used universally for doctoral-level degrees, the status and recognition of which would be diminished by its use for other qualifications. It also argues that allowing "confusing" titling would mean Australia's practices would be incompatible with the Framework of Qualifications - European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA), and that alignment with the European body is important for recognition of Australian qualifications internationally.

Some facts:

- MD and JD titles are recognised for Masters level professional entry degrees in many parts of the world, particularly the US (where the MD has been in use for 200 years). The choice of title therefore ensures international recognition and portability of university awards, and facilitates exchange arrangements with the world's leading Universities. Go8 universities are increasingly globally engaged and seek higher levels of engagement in order to realise their aspirations for excellence. The global recognition of these courses is important to their capacity to attract talented students and to build international exchange relationships that

enrich program quality. Global recognition also provides direct benefits to our students, whose internationally recognised qualifications ensure their global mobility and employability abroad.

- The Australian Higher Education Graduate Statement (AHEGS), university promotional materials, and handbooks and course materials made available to students are the proper places to show how different titles align with AQF levels. The Europeans use their 'diploma supplement' for this purpose. The courses in question with the title 'Doctor' are understood internationally to be post-bachelor, professional-entry, Masters level programs. They align with qualifications at level 9 on the proposed new AQF levels.
- There is no evidence internationally that JDs or MDs have reduced the status of the PhD. Lawyers with JDs are not admitted to practise "as doctors", for example, and would not refer to themselves as such. The holder of an MD would only be referred to as a "doctor" when admitted to practice.

The AQFC is neither the owner of qualifications nor their custodian. Australian universities accredit their own awards. Currently the AQFC has no formal approval role or power, although it is not clear what role the AQF will play in respect of TEQSA and in the legislation the Federal Government will develop. However, the restrictions it is seeking to impose on titles could be damaging if they are incorporated into the new regulatory framework.

By seeking to intrude on university autonomy over qualification titles, the AQFC is taking a backward-looking and insular approach which can only promote sameness and reduce responsiveness. It should stay focussed on its levels as the primary reference for learners, employers, institutions, and TEQSA.

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