



Why should universities obtain accreditation for their OHS programs?

Accreditation of OHS professional education programs is relatively new. The Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board was established in 2011 with the first programs accredited in 2012. Six programs are currently accredited with others being assessed.

With 14 universities currently offering OHS programs it is reasonable for universities offering OHS professional education to ask the question “Why should we accredit?” The answer lies in the value of accredited programs to students and graduates, employers and the community as well as the direct benefits to the university.

Value of accreditation to students and graduates

Accreditation of OHS professional education provides guidance for students considering OHS professional education.

Potential students considering undertaking OHS studies face a myriad of information and varying advice: VET versus university; which university, which level qualification; distance, block mode or face to face?

The Accreditation Board website is increasingly becoming the first port of call for potential students. They find general guidance on selecting a qualification as well as a list of the OHS programs offered by Australian universities with accredited programs clearly identified. The program register has a description of each program including web links and contact information.

With the implementation of a profession wide (voluntary) certification of Generalist OHS Professionals scheduled for 2013-14 graduates of accredited programs will be deemed to meet the knowledge requirements for certification. While graduates of non accredited programs will not be excluded from certification it may be that their application will require further documentation or assessment.

The Accreditation Board is involved in an international network developing a framework for practice which, in the future, may provide a basis for international comparability and reciprocal recognition for accredited qualifications, thus promoting mobility of OHS professionals.

Value to employers

Accreditation of OHS professional education programs provides guidance for employers and recruiters in selecting OHS professionals and in supporting the professional development of personnel.

A recent remuneration survey¹ found a consistent trend towards entry level OHS professionals holding a minimum of an OHS undergraduate degree with postgraduate diploma and masters qualifications required for higher level positions. Remuneration levels also reflect qualification level. With the downturn in many industries employers are becoming more discriminating requiring qualifications as a basic criterion for recruitment and also requiring incumbent OHS advisors to upgrade their OHS qualifications.

As part of meeting their *due diligence* managers and senior officers of an organisation should have access to credible advice from appropriate people. Appropriate qualifications are one aspect of credible and appropriate advice. The importance of organisational OHS capability has been recognised in the Australian WHS Strategy 2012-2022. The Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board has published the “*Developing OHS Capability*

¹ Health safety and environment remuneration survey 2012-2013. (2013). Safesearch, Melbourne.



*Package*² designed to assist employers evaluate their OHS capability requirements and develop strategies to address these requirements. Accredited programs and qualification pathways are an important part of this package

Value to the community

Accreditation of OHS professional education programs contributes to public assurance that graduates meet certain minimum standards of knowledge and skills. Accreditation also contributes to community perceptions of OHS as a valued profession.

Accreditation of OHS professional education programs places OHS alongside other professions facilitating recognition of OHS as a profession requiring university level qualifications.

The value of qualified OHS professionals has been highlighted in recent research identifying a link between employment of qualified OHS professionals and reduced fatality rates whereas no such link was found between numbers of practitioner/technicians and fatality rate.³

Value to provider institutions

Provider institutions benefit from having their OHS programs accredited through enhanced profile, reputation and standing with potential students and employers.

Holding accreditation for a program demonstrates that a university has undergone a process of self and peer assessment. The accredited program is promoted through the Accreditation Board's on-line list of accredited courses while the university can display the Accredited Program logo on program literature and their web site.



Provider institutions realise quality improvement in their programs by submitting their program to a self and peer assessment process.

All universities that have undertaken accreditation have commented that it made a positive contribution to their program and its documentation. The Accreditation Criteria are framed around the same categories as the Provider Standards in the Higher Education Standards Framework. Thus the outcomes of the self and peer assessment of the OHS program will be consistent with and contribute to other university quality processes. As the role of professional accreditation for Higher Education programs is recognised by the Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) as being part of the Australian Education Quality System the outcomes of the OHS accreditation process may be considered in a TEQSA audit.

Provider institutions also realise other benefits from accreditation.

The accreditation process results in an OHS program having an increased profile within the school and faculty. Accreditation also brings OHS education into closer alignment with other professions requiring accreditation.

Institutions providing accredited programs are eligible to nominate students for the SIA national OHS education awards, and educators for the Accreditation Board teaching and learning awards. While all universities are currently invited to nominate for these awards once the interim period for implementing accreditation has passed award nomination will be restricted to universities with accredited programs.

² See www.ohseducationaccreditation.org.au.

³ Rebbitt, D. (2013) *The value proposition of a safety professional*. Conference Proceedings: Developing World Class Safety. CSSE, Montreal, Canada. September.