



Review of implementation of accreditation of OHS professional education in Australia

Executive Summary

With accreditation of university-level OHS professional education having been implemented in 2012 the Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board undertook a review of the process in 2014. The review involved interviews of OHS academics and OHS professionals involved in the first seven accreditation assessments and analysis of accreditation reports and associated annual reviews for the 13 accreditation assessments conducted to date. The accreditation process and criteria were also benchmarked to international examples.

In the 3 years that accreditation of OHS professional education has been available 64% of universities offering OHS education have one or more accredited programs with 68% of the available programs accredited. A further 3 accreditations (4 programs) are pending with 2 universities (4 programs) having advised their intention to submit. A further 3 universities are not in a position to submit due to the status of reviews or resourcing issues.

Accreditation outcomes together with comments by interviewees indicates that accreditation is impacting on the quality of OHS professional education in Australia. This impact varies from providing a stimulus for minor review and 'tweaking' to revision of whole courses within programs. Accreditation also created leverage for obtaining resources within the universities and for implementing change. Major areas of change were made to content through mapping to the OHS Body of Knowledge and in tightening assessment processes. For a number of universities, the accreditation process also enabled them to articulate and build on strengths to establish their profile in the Australian OHS education context.

The accreditation process was considered time consuming and resource intensive by most people but this comment should be seen in the context that most universities were simultaneously undertaking reviews to bring programs into line with new AQF and TEQSA requirements and that programs should be undergoing regular review. As the evidence for accreditation is based on current documentation and student learning resources any effort in developing materials for accreditation should have a positive impact on the program.

In comparing the Australian accreditation process and criteria to that of ABET (US) and IOSH considerable similarity was identified in both criteria and process with ABET. The IOSH assessment is based on the input of an academic reader and an external examiner rather than a panel and IOSH relies on another body to assess the level of qualification and education-related aspects of the program. Neither IOSH or ABET define the depth of required knowledge although ABET is currently undertaking a review. As part of benchmarking the criteria, the OHS Body of Knowledge was mapped to the knowledge statements in the INSHPO Global Framework for Practice with the outcome that there is a high level of correlation between the INSHPO knowledge statements and the topics covered by the OHS Body of Knowledge. The identified gaps will inform the development of new chapters for the OHS Body of Knowledge. The Australian OHS capability statements, which are derived from the AQF, were mapped to the INSHPO skills statements which include actions and performance criteria. While there is some high level comparability the differing format makes comparison difficult. As there is a strong AQF basis it is important to retain the Australian capability



statements as part of the criteria. While the INSHPO framework targets currently practicing OHS professionals there is value in making the INSHPO skill framework available to educators to inform their assessment processes.

Accreditation is an important step in giving students confidence in the program and in improving the professionalism of the profession. Interviewees emphasised that it should be objective. Even though each university will maintain a certain style or flavour maintaining this may be difficult in the future and the accreditation criteria and process need to enable each university to create their own niche. The process needs to be equitable and reliable in the sense that it is repeatable.

While the general consensus was that accreditation has had a positive impact on OHS professional education in Australia and that the criteria and process are fair and valid, a number of actions for improvement have been identified. These actions come under 3 headings:

Accreditation criteria

1. Review criteria to eliminate any repetition.
2. Review guideline for criterion related to the OHS Body of Knowledge to clarify requirements while maintaining flexibility.
3. Review the schedule for developing new chapters for the OHS Body of Knowledge giving priority to 'health' related chapters and gaps identified in the mapping of the OHS Body of Knowledge to the INSHPO knowledge statements. (in association with SIA.)

Interviews

4. While interview questions tend to be structured to explore specific queries/issues that have arisen through examination of documents or previous interviews the sample interview questions should be reviewed to better reflect actual questions.

Promotion

5. Promotion strategy linking accreditation and certification targeting potential students, OHS practitioners and professionals and employers to be developed in association with SIA

The Education Advisor to the Accreditation Board provided an independent review of the accreditation criteria and process which is included as an Attachment. The recommendations from this report are listed below and should be read in conjunction with that report.

Accreditation principles

6. The first principle for accreditation should be amended to read: 'The accreditation process acknowledges that academic quality and program standards are the responsibility of institutions through their internal procedures for quality assurance and thus requires evidence of the operation of such mechanisms for validating program outcomes and maintaining quality improvement.'
7. The third principle should be strengthened by adding a second sentence – 'As a corollary, institutions are expected to be open and transparent in providing all appropriate information to the accreditation process on request.'
8. The fourth principle by amending 'aligned with institution quality processes' so it reads 'aligned with institutional and other externally required quality assurance processes.'
9. The sixth principle be omitted.
10. The last three words of principle eight be omitted.

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Eligible programs

11. The wording of the second element of the definition of an OHS professional education program be amended to read 'at least 50% of the credit points' rather than '50% of the credit points'.
12. The OHS Education Accreditation Board should establish a small working group to bring forward a paper for consideration on a shared understanding of 'assessment performance to agreed standards'.

Accreditation criteria

13. The Board maintain the present link between OHS accreditation and TEQSA accreditation standards.
14. The Board significantly strengthen the requirement for genuine involvement of the OHS profession in program development.
15. The Registrar establish a small group to redevelop the performance measure for Criterion 1.7.
16. The performance measure of Criterion 1.8 be expanded to include the research base of teaching practice.
17. The performance measure for Criterion 5.6 should be amended to read: Assessment together with timely and comprehensive feedback to students on their performance is demonstrably an integral part of the learning process.
18. The performance measure for Criterion 6.3 be amended to read: OHS Programs should have a consultative committee with a majority of industry-based professionals, who see documentation relating to review and program development at such time as allows them to have input to proposals before they go to school or university approval committees or other decision-making bodies.

Acknowledgement

The qualitative component of this review was conducted by Eamon Brown as part of his Master of Public Health in the unit titled *PUBH5101 Special Project*. Eamon conducted semi-structured interviews and analysed the outcomes of the recorded interviews to provide a report on the response to accreditation by the universities and the academic and OHS professional members of the accreditation assessment panels. Eamon's contribution has been essential to the integrity of the review process by bringing an independent perspective to the data collection and analysis.

For full report see <http://www.ohseducationaccreditation.org.au/about-us/>

See also: Pryor, P. (in press). Accredited OHS professional education: a step change for OHS capability, *Safety Science*.