



POSITION STATEMENT

April 2013

Duration of Occupational Health and Safety Practitioner Qualifications

Occupational Health and Safety qualifications in the Vocational Education and Training sector vary in duration. In many cases the duration is less than the Volume of Learning specified by the Australian Qualification Framework. This indicates that some courses may not be of sufficient duration to enable the learner to develop the depth and breadth of knowledge and skills.

The Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board recommends that potential students, employers and recruiters take steps to clarify the duration/volume of learning and satisfy themselves that the course being considered delivers the depth and breadth of knowledge and skills appropriate to the qualification level.

1 The situation

1.1 OHS qualifications

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) practitioner qualifications in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector include the Certificate IV in OHS, Diploma in OHS and the Advanced Diploma in OHS. These qualifications provide a pathway into working as an OHS practitioner, certification as an OHS practitioner and, in some cases, entry to higher education qualifications in OHS. These qualifications are delivered, assessed and awarded by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) authorised by the Australian Skills Quality Agency (ASQA) to meet nationally endorsed competencies approved by the National Skills Standards Council (NSSC).

It is vital that there is confidence in the competence of people holding these qualifications as employers may rely on their advice regarding implementation and status of strategies to prevent workplace death, injury and illness. The Safety Institute of Australia and the Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board have received a number of anecdotal and written complaints from OHS professionals, employers and educators regarding the 'short course' format of the VET OHS qualifications delivered by a number of providers. A review of a selection of providers shows that the duration of courses offered varies from 5 days to 12 months or more. Given that the qualifications should be equivalent irrespective of provider the variation in duration may indicate issues of quality, depth and consistency of learning outcomes.

1.2 The Australian Qualification Framework

The Australian Qualification Framework (AQF)¹ is the national policy for regulating education and training qualifications in Australia. The AQF describes 10 levels of qualifications and the specifications for each level. The Certificate IV in OHS is an AQF Level 4 qualification; the Diploma in OHS an AQF Level 5 qualification and the Advanced Diploma an AQF Level 6 qualification.

¹ Australian Qualification Framework (2013). Accessed at www.aqf.edu.au.



Volume of learning is one of the criteria specified for each AQF qualification type.²

- Certificate 4: “typically 0.5 – 2 years. There may be variations between short duration specialist qualifications that build on knowledge and skills already acquired and longer duration qualifications that are designed as entry level requirements for work”.
- Diploma: “typically 1-2 years”.
- Advanced Diploma: “typically 1.5 – 2 years”.

In its explanation of volume of learning, the Australian Qualifications Framework Council makes the following points:³

- Along with other factors such as breadth and depth of knowledge, volume of learning defines the complexity of the qualification
- The volume of learning for a qualification must fall within the stated range
- The concept of “typically” is intended to provide some flexibility, it is not intended as a justification for not applying the requirement
- The volume of learning allocated to a qualification should include all teaching, learning and assessment activities required to be undertaken by the typical student to achieve the learning outcomes
- The volume of learning is defined in equivalent full time years with the generally accepted length of a full time year being 1200 hours.

Applying the AQF criteria for volume of learning the Board expects that completion of the OHS practitioner qualifications would require the following time commitment:

Certificate IV in OHS	600 hours
Diploma in OHS	1200 hours
Advanced Diploma in OHS	1800 hours.

OHS Certificate IV, Diploma and Advanced Diploma qualifications delivered in short course format may not enable learners to develop the required depth and breadth of knowledge and skills. Shorter periods of time would require justification by the RTO that the student is able to achieve the learning outcomes in the time.

2 The role of Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board

The Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board is an independent body auspiced by the Safety Institute of Australia. Its core function is to provide professional accreditation for university level OHS professional education programs. It also undertakes activities to support the development and recognition of OHS professional education and is ‘custodian’ of the OHS Body of Knowledge responsible for ensuring its currency and further development. The Accreditation Board engages with a broad range of stakeholders and interested parties including OHS professionals, educators, trainers, employers, recruiters and international groups.

The scope of activity of the Accreditation Board does not extend to accreditation of VET sector OHS qualifications. However as part of its role in supporting a sustainable environment for OHS education and recognition of OHS education it is working with relevant government agencies on strategies to address concerns about consistency of delivery of OHS qualifications in the VET sector. The Accreditation Board sees the issue of this position paper and its advice as part of its role in informing interested parties about OHS education.

² AQF (2011) p 15. www.aqf.edu.au.

³ See *Volume of Learning: An Explanation* issued November 2012. Accessed from www.aqf.edu.au.



3 Advice to potential students, employers, recruiters and educators

Acting on the finding that OHS Certificate IV, Diploma and Advanced Diploma qualifications delivered in short course format are of a duration less than that prescribed by the AQF and so may not enable learners to develop the required depth and breadth of knowledge and skills, the Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board offers the following advice.

Potential students of OHS Certificate IV, Diploma or Advanced Diploma:

As part of assessing the course and providers most suited to your needs check the duration of the course with the volume of learning specified by the AQF for that qualification level. If the duration is less than that specified then make enquiries with the providers as to the rationale for the short duration. If not satisfied with the response then consider other options.

Employers, recruiters of OHS personnel:

Where a Certificate IV in OHS, Diploma in OHS or Advanced Diploma in OHS are requirements for a position or where the applicant presents one of more of these qualifications as evidence of competence for an OHS role it would be prudent to check the duration/volume of learning involved in obtaining the qualification. It may be appropriate to take additional measures to ensure competence of the applicant.

The importance of such steps to ensure appropriate qualifications and competence of those providing OHS advice is part of the due diligence of an officer as defined in the Work Health and Act 2011. *Due diligence* includes doing all that is reasonably practicable to obtain appropriate advice and ensuring that the source of that advice is credible.

“An officer may rely on information, advice and the activities of others in their governance of health and safety management and decision making. They must be able to demonstrate that such reliance is reasonable.”
*Safe Work Australia.*⁴

Employers:

Where employers are supporting the further development of their current OHS personnel they should take steps to ensure that the courses studied will deliver a qualification based on an appropriate volume of learning.

Educators

In some cases a VET OHS Diploma may be accepted as part of the criteria for alternative entry into a higher level AQF program. In such cases educators should consider the duration of the OHS Diploma and where appropriate take additional measures to assess the applicant’s potential for meeting the required standard.

⁴ Safe Work Australia. *FAQ on Role of an officer* Accessed www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au.