Australian Industry Group says the AQF must be updated

By Megan Lilly – Executive Director, Centre for Education & Training, Australian Industry Group, with Prof Sally Kift – Vice Chancellor's Fellow, Victoria University

N o one would disagree with the statement that Australia needs a world-leading education and training system that is up to the task.

Most would agree that means a responsive system that is flexible and agile enough to develop knowledge, skills and capabilities in an integrated way.

What may be less well known is that, currently, the Australian Qualifications Framework (or 'AQF') – the scaffolding that structures the system – does not facilitate this, and is acting as a major, fundamental barrier to change.

A world-class education and training system that embraces knowledge and skill generation, as well as work-ready application, will be key to creating the skilled population and workforce we need.

Yet the current framework is like a bookshelf on which all the education and training options are stored on dusty shelves. There are separate shelves for those primarily seeking 'knowledge' and those only interested in 'skills'. Some courses (and therefore learners) are on the bottom shelf, some are in the middle, and some are on the top, and it's very difficult to change your mind and move between sections or shelves as you learn and develop over a lifetime. It also doesn't work if you don't need a whole book, just a short snapshot – like a microcredential.

It's a model developed in another time. It's outdated and doesn't reflect what we now know about learning for work and life.

What would it take for Australia to fix it? The full implementation of the Noonan Review of the AQF is an essential first step.

The recommendations of the Review provide for a future-facing, coherent and cohesive framework with agility and flexibility to meet the needs of current and future labour markets.

It raises the bar on what a qualifications framework could do, enabling change and innovation in modern qualification development and delivery.

Its flexible, dynamic lifelong approach to learning would facilitate the development of best-in-class tradespeople, high end professionals, ground-breaking researchers and highly skilled carers, as well as a more inclusive community with assured levels of foundation skills including digital literacy.

What's more, it would facilitate increased labour mobility between jobs, including jobs that do not yet exist.

The most striking reform proposed relates to the concept of 'unlocking the levels'. The current framework has ten hierarchical levels delineated on the basis of knowledge and skills locked into a laddered progression.

This rigid approach assumes that knowledge is privileged over skills and application is always constant. The reality is otherwise. Always has been.

All jobs require *knowledge* and *skills* and their *application*, but not all at the same level. Should the prescribed level of 'knowledge' also determine and set the same level for 'skill'? Knowledge/skill combinations vary enormously. Think of nurses, compared with lawyers or electricians.

Let's imagine for a moment an education and training system where knowledge and skills are equally valued, and the relationship between them – in terms of the realities and complexities of learning and the world of work – is understood and clearly expressed.

Rethinking and rebalancing the relationship between knowledge and skills opens up an opportunity to accurately capture the needs of current and future labour markets in an authentic way.

Not only that, the proposed changes to the AQF create the necessary policy architecture to move towards a genuine tertiary sector, one that values the best of vocational and higher education in a connected and cohesive way, and that eases pathways from schooling.

This would – finally – move us beyond the chasm we currently have between the two post-secondary sectors.

Currently, the regulatory and funding arrangements are significantly different, and VET is the poor cousin. Yet, from an industry perspective, much of the current and future skill growth required for a modern transforming economy occurs at the intersection of the two sectors. STEM-based technician and para-professional roles in particular. The current strategies in this space are complicated, awkward and inefficient 'workarounds'. It's just not good enough.

The changes proposed also include a re-conceptualisation of general capabilities – to include language, literacy and numeracy skills, core skills for work, digital literacy and ethical decision making. The addition of 'psychomotor' within the skills domain addresses a long overdue omission.

Persisting with the current AQF that makes no mention of digital skills is bewildering at best.

For individuals to succeed in the twenty-first century labour market, they are going to need a rich combination of cognitive skills, socio-emotional skills, technical skills and digital skills – and these will need to be developed in dynamic and diverse ways.

The qualifications framework needs to rise to this challenge.

In the decades ahead we will need to come to terms with the impact and opportunity artificial intelligence (AI) creates for our education and training system. ChatGPT has been with us less than six months but has already caused enormous disruption. AI requires us to deeply question both our course design and assessment.

A up-to-date AQF leaves us much better placed to deal with rapidly shifting education, training and labour market demands over the next decades.

It is bold reform. It won't be quick, nor will it be easy. But it is necessary.

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