



Guidance Note: *Nested Courses of Study*

Version 2.2 (13 August 2019)

Providers should note that Guidance Notes are intended to provide guidance only. They are not definitive or binding documents. Nor are they prescriptive. The definitive instruments for regulatory purposes remain the TEQSA Act and the Higher Education Standards Framework as amended from time to time.

What do ‘nested’ courses of study encompass?

‘Nested courses’ is not a term used in the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (HES Framework), but in this context is interpreted to mean a set of courses of study that are offered sequentially and can lead to qualifications at different Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels. Courses at the lower qualification levels are described as ‘nested’ within the courses leading to qualifications at the higher levels (as represented in Figure 1 below). Nested courses are typically offered by a single provider but could be offered through a third-party arrangement (see separate guidance note on third-party arrangements). It is also possible that components of the nested program may be completed at different independently registered providers and the ‘nesting’ achieved by credit transfer arrangements between the providers.

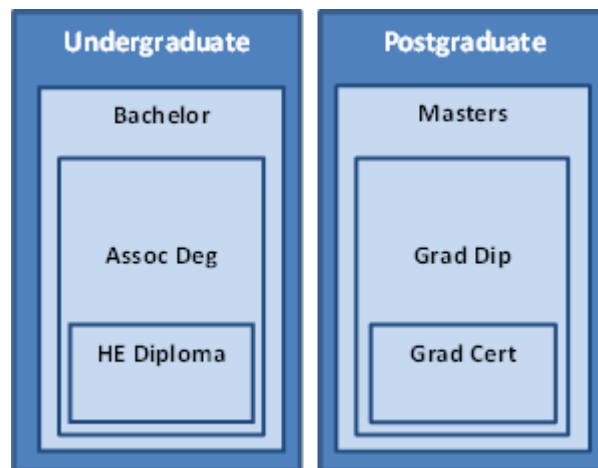
This guidance note focuses solely on coursework, but nesting arrangements are also found in higher degrees by research in some specific circumstances.

Figure 1 - A diagrammatic representation of nested courses of study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels¹.

¹ The diagram portrays an arrangement for a single provider but it is not intended to preclude arrangements with third parties or between independent providers.



Differing student participation



models of

A nested arrangement of courses and qualifications potentially enables multiple entry and exit points for students. Students may exit with a qualification at one of the lower levels after completing a defined subset of the total program. They may also enter at different levels depending on their prior experience or qualifications in the field of study and the provider's requirements for recognition of prior learning.

Students who are admitted in the first instance only to a lower level course and complete that course successfully, will typically be granted a defined amount of credit towards admission into the higher-level courses, should they wish to proceed. In a three-stage program that contains exit points at the end of each stage, this would typically entail one-third credit being granted for completion of each level.

However, students who are enrolled directly into the higher course at the outset are not normally granted credit for completion of each level. Instead, they normally proceed through the entire program of study just like any other non-nested course of study, unless they change their plans and decide to exit at a lower level.

The first scenario (enrolment in a lower level) can be referred to as an 'opt-in' model, and the second (enrolling for the highest level at the outset) can be referred to as an 'opt-out' model. The nature and requirements of the model chosen must be made fully transparent to prospective and current students.

Relevant Standards in the HES Framework

The Standards that are primarily concerned with nested courses of study are the same as those that apply to all individual courses of study that lead to the award of a higher education qualification that is recognised in the AQF. These are the Standards in Domain 1 (Student Participation and Attainment), Domain 2 (Learning Environment), Domain 3 (Teaching) and, if applicable to the provider, Domain 4 (Research and Research Training).

The Standards apply to all of the nested components individually where they *may* lead to the award of a qualification, even if the qualification is not awarded because a student decides to continue with a higher course of study rather than exit with a lower qualification.



The requirements for institutional approval of courses (Section 5.1 Course Approval and Accreditation) apply equally to scrutiny and approval of nested arrangements, through the provider's peak academic governance bodies. This applies whether or not a provider has self-accrediting authority.

Intent of the Standards

The intent of the Standards is to ensure that the requirements of the HES Framework for admission, recognition of prior learning, orientation and progression, achievement of learning outcomes and award of qualifications are met, irrespective of which level of study is undertaken and which qualification may be awarded. The requirements for the learning environment, course design, staffing, learning resources and educational support also apply to every component of a nested program.

Each course of study within a nested set that may lead to an AQF qualification must meet the requirements of all of the relevant Standards in its own right, irrespective of any nesting arrangement. This includes the requirement that all qualifications that are awarded are consistent with the level classification of the qualifications in the AQF.

For example, it follows that in the nested programs illustrated in Figure 1:

- the course of study leading to the Bachelor or Master degree must have specified expected learning outcomes that are consistent with the level classification of the AQF for a Bachelor or Master degree
- the course of study leading to the Associate Degree or Graduate Diploma must have specified expected learning outcomes that are consistent with the level classification of the AQF for Associate Degree or Graduate Diploma
- the course of study leading to the Diploma or Graduate Certificate must have specified expected learning outcomes that are consistent with the level classification of the AQF for Diploma or Graduate Certificate.

Risks to Quality

There are many examples of successful nested arrangements. They are however vulnerable to a variety of risks, including where:

- the integrity, coherency, overall level of study, or learning outcomes of the courses leading to qualifications awarded at the higher and highest levels of study are compromised or diluted by excessive lower-level material
- students who complete the requirements of a lower level and then decide to proceed to higher levels are not sufficiently prepared to undertake the higher level of study
- lower level components are ill conceived to achieve both of their two possible roles; either a coherent terminating course of study leading to the award of an appropriate qualification or an effective preparation for continuing study at a higher level
- the course leading to the highest level of study is not conceived as a coherent whole, but is a collection of unrelated parts, thus degrading the qualification awarded



- excessive or inappropriate award of credit for prior learning that compromises the integrity of the course(s) and/or disadvantages the students concerned - this risk mainly arises where credit is awarded for a qualification completed at a third party provider (refer to the guidelines in The Australian Qualifications Framework second edition 2013. The Pathways Policy section 2.1.10 is a reference point)
- teaching staff in lower levels are not sufficiently qualified and experienced to lead students who will be progressing to higher levels, or
- cohorts of students with differing learning needs (e.g. planning to exit at a lower level versus continuing to higher levels) are taught jointly, leading to the different learning outcomes not being met for some students.

Such adverse outcomes may jeopardise the TEQSA accreditation of a course(s) of study.

What TEQSA will look for

This part of the guidance note covers the full extent of the Standards, and corresponding evidence that TEQSA may require, in relation to nested courses of study.

For new applicants seeking initial registration and course accreditation, TEQSA will require evidence to be provided in relation to all relevant Standards.

For existing providers, the scope of Standards to be assessed and the evidence required may vary. This is consistent with the regulatory principles in the TEQSA Act, under which TEQSA has discretion to vary the scope of its assessments and the related evidence required. In exercising this discretion, TEQSA will be guided by the provider's regulatory history, its risk profile and its track record in delivering high quality higher education.

TEQSA's case managers will discuss with providers the scope of assessments and evidence required well ahead of the due date for submitting an application.

The evidence required for particular types of application is available from the Application Guides on the TEQSA website.

Providers are required to comply with the Standards at all times, not just at the time of application, and TEQSA may seek evidence of compliance at other times if a risk of non-compliance is identified.

TEQSA will need to be satisfied that each and every nested component of the course of study meets the requirements of the HES Framework as a stand-alone course and that any combination of nested elements meets the requirements of the HES Framework, especially for the highest level of study and qualification awarded. The provider needs to demonstrate that students who are enrolled in a lower course at the outset, but have the option of continuing on to complete the higher courses in the nested set, achieve the learning outcomes for their initial course in the first instance, while at the same time positioning themselves to achieve the learning outcomes for courses leading to awards at higher levels if they proceed through the nested sequence. This applies regardless of whether the course conforms to an opt-in model or an opt-out model.

TEQSA will need to be confident that the inclusion of subjects and subject elements at lower levels does not undermine the integrity of the highest level of course being delivered. This issue goes to the level of each subject, its content, its teaching staff and its assessment. The greater the proportion of subjects with learning outcomes that are below the AQF level for



the higher course, the greater the risk that the higher course will not meet the HES Framework requirements for course accreditation.

In assessing a course proposal, TEQSA needs to be able to see clearly where each of the learning outcomes for each course is taught and assessed, and that the learning outcomes are consistent with the level of study and the highest level of qualification involved. Where providers are presenting nested courses for assessment, it will be of assistance to TEQSA if an explanation and/or mapping is provided that shows where and how course learning outcomes are addressed and assessed throughout the entire program.

Approval and Design of Nested Programs

TEQSA expects to see, for all nested courses of study where students:

- enrol, or could enrol, at the highest level initially (an opt-out model), or
- can study at more than one level of the nested arrangement based on completion of a lower level(s) (an opt-in model),

the nested program has been designed and approved as a whole, in its entirety, by the provider. The provider must be able to demonstrate in particular that the learning outcomes and their assessment at each level of the program are not only appropriate for issuing a subsidiary qualification if a student should exit at one of the lower levels, but also that the learning outcomes at these levels position students for progression through an opt-out model in its entirety should students undertake that option. The learning outcomes for all levels of the program must also be consistent with the issue of an AQF qualification at the highest level of the nested program.

In other words, TEQSA expects the nested arrangement to be designed and approved as if it were a three-level course of study, irrespective of the mode of participation by students. The difference is only that learning outcomes for each level must also be consistent with the award of an AQF qualification at that level should students exit at that level. Design and approval of the program in its entirety must also involve reviewers with a relevant qualification at least one AQF level above the highest qualification being offered, as would be required of a non-nested arrangement (Standard 3.2.3).

Staffing of Nested Programs

The HES Framework requires that staff who have oversight of and teach in a course of study must be qualified to at least one level higher than the course of study being taught, or have equivalent relevant professional experience (3.2.3). The HES Framework also requires that staff who do not meet the requirements of 3.2.3 in their entirety, such as experienced practitioners involved with specialised components, must have their teaching guided and overseen by staff who do (3.2.4). For the purposes of an opt-in model, TEQSA requires that staff who teach at any level of a nested program must be qualified at least one AQF level higher than that being taught, or have equivalent professional experience.

Oversight of Teaching

Should the nested program cater for opt-out students, at a minimum the teaching of such staff at the lower levels of the program must be guided and overseen by staff who are qualified at least at one AQF level above the highest qualification being offered, or equivalent. Alternatively and preferably, there are teaching staff at all levels of an opt-out program who are qualified at one AQF level above the highest qualification offered and such staff are able to oversee and guide other staff who may not be so qualified. Where equivalent professional experience is claimed, the provider should have formal criteria for evaluating this (see TEQSA's guidance note on determining equivalence of professional experience and academic qualifications). In this context, 'oversight' is taken to mean



observation, guidance and monitoring of at least course delivery, content and assessment, including monitoring of student progress and feedback.

Minimum Teaching Qualifications

Notwithstanding a minimum requirement for AQF+1 qualifications at lower levels of a nested program (3.2.3), TEQSA expects that teaching staff in higher education must be qualified with at least a bachelor degree relevant to their teaching, in order to meet the broader content and skills requirements of the HESF (e.g. 3.2.2, 3.2.3a, 3.2.3 b). Thus, where AQF+1 may otherwise be less than a bachelor degree for the lower levels of a nested arrangement, the minimum requirement is still a relevant bachelor degree.

Applicants may be admitted into any of the nested courses based on prior academic achievement, or in some cases equivalent professional experience. Where admission is on the basis of professional experience, providers must have reason for their confidence that students will be able to achieve the academic standards required; bearing in mind that professional experience may not always equip applicants with the requisite academic study skills.

Where applicants are admitted to any of these courses with advanced standing based on prior academic achievement, to maintain the integrity of their course the provider must be able to demonstrate to TEQSA that it has taken into account the comparability and equivalence of the learning outcomes, volume of learning, program of study (including content and learning and assessment approaches), with those of the provider's own course.

Above all, the provider must be able to demonstrate that all students admitted to any course have sufficient grounding in knowledge and skills to be able to achieve the learning outcomes of each course in the time available, taking into consideration the course design. Students must be required to have sufficient grounding to complete all the units that are necessary for them to achieve the course learning outcomes, given their potentially different starting points in prior knowledge and skills.

Because of the variety of possible nested arrangements, providers are advised to consult with their TEQSA case manager when contemplating such arrangements.

Resources and references

Australian Qualifications Framework Council (2013), *Australian Qualifications Framework Second Edition January 2013*, <<https://www.aqf.edu.au/>>.

Australian Qualifications Framework Council, *Addendum to the AQF Second Edition January 2013: Amended Qualification Type: Masters Degree*, May 2014 (replaces pages 59-62 of the *AQF Second Edition January 2013*), <<https://www.aqf.edu.au/sites/aqf/files/aqf-addendum-2014.pdf>>.

Australian Qualifications Framework Council (November 2012), *Clustered Qualifications: An Explanation*, <<https://www.aqf.edu.au/sites/aqf/files/clustered-qualifications-explanation.pdf>>.

Australian Qualifications Framework Council (November 2012), *Proportion of Components of a Qualification at a Level: An Explanation*, <<https://www.aqf.edu.au/sites/aqf/files/components-of-a-qualification-explanation.pdf>>.

TEQSA (2016), *Explanations of terms in Part A of the HES Framework 2015*, <<http://www.teqsa.gov.au/explanations-hes-framework-terms>>.



TEQSA (2016), Guidance Notes on *Course Design, Learning Outcomes and Assessment* and on *Determining Equivalence of Professional Experience and Academic Qualifications*, <<http://www.teqsa.gov.au/hesf-2015-specific-guidance-notes>>.

TEQSA welcomes the diversity of educational delivery across the sector and acknowledges that its Guidance Notes may not encompass all of the circumstances seen in the sector. TEQSA also recognises that the requirements of the HESF can be met in different ways according to the circumstances of the provider. Provided the requirements of the HESF are met, TEQSA will not prescribe how they are met. If in doubt, please consult your TEQSA case manager.

Version #	Date	Key changes
1.0	March 2013	
2.0	19 August 2016	Updated for the HESF 2015 and made available as beta version for consultation.
2.1	11 October 2017	Addition to 'What will TEQSA look for?' text box.
2.2	13 August 2019	Amendments relating to minimum qualifications of teaching staff and course approval in light of stakeholder feedback.