



*National Guideline
for Responding to
Complaints about
Vocational Education
and Training Quality*

© Commonwealth of Australia July 2007

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Section 1 – Introduction to AQTF 2007

The national training system is a key driver of Australia's economic and social growth. For more than a decade, Australian, state and territory governments have worked with industry to develop a national training system that now provides the basis for high-quality, industry developed and nationally recognised training to about one in nine working-age Australians. Through a national network of over 4,200 public and private registered training providers, over 1.5 million Australians from all ages, backgrounds and locations participate in vocational education and training each year to support their life goals.

The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) is the national set of standards which assures nationally consistent, high-quality training and assessment services for the clients of Australia's vocational education and training system. AQTF 2007 is the current version of the framework, effective from 1 July 2007.

The National Quality Council (NQC) collaboratively developed AQTF 2007 and will continue to monitor it. The NQC includes all state and territory governments, the Australian Government, peak industry bodies, peak training organisations and a representative on equity issues. The Ministerial Council of Vocational and Technical Education, which includes all Ministers for Training in Australia, has approved these quality arrangements.

The three components of AQTF 2007

The three components of AQTF 2007 are:

Essential Standards for Registration – Training organisations must meet these standards in order to deliver and assess nationally recognised training and issue nationally recognised qualifications. They include three standards, a requirement for registered training organisations to gather information on their performance against three quality indicators, and nine conditions of registration.

Standards for State and Territory Registering Bodies – State and territory registering bodies are responsible for registering training organisations and for quality assuring the training and assessment services they provide, in accordance with the AQTF 2007 and relevant legislation within each jurisdiction. The standards and supporting guidelines provide a national operating framework.

Excellence Criteria – These are criteria that registered training organisations may use voluntarily to continue improving the quality of their training and assessment and to gain recognition of their performance.

The key features of AQTF 2007

Outcomes-focused

AQTF 2007 focuses on the quality of services and outcomes being achieved for clients rather than the inputs used to get there. This means that registered training organisations have more flexibility in demonstrating how their individual approaches provide quality training outcomes for their clients.

Nationally consistent

Individuals expect that they can use the skills from nationally endorsed qualifications across Australia and employers expect that the staff they hire have the same skills no matter where they were trained. State and territory registering bodies have worked together to develop and publish national guidelines to ensure consistent interpretation and implementation of AQTF 2007.

Streamlined

The standards for registered training organisations have been simplified and streamlined to focus on outcomes. AQTF 2007 places the focus of quality assurance squarely on training and assessment, client services and management systems.

Transparent

National guidelines and handbooks to be used by registering bodies in all states and territories are readily accessible through the national training website: www.training.com.au/aqtf2007.

The commitment by registering bodies to work together on continuous improvement in implementation of AQTF 2007 is one of the measures to build confidence of industry, clients, regulators and registered training organisations in the quality assurance arrangements of the training system.

The beneficiaries of AQTF 2007

Learners have equitable access to quality training and assessment services tailored to their needs and the learning outcomes they seek.

Industry, unions, enterprises and regulators have confidence that registered training organisations are delivering training and assessment services that achieve the skill requirements of nationally recognised qualifications developed by industry.

Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) can focus on providing quality training and assessment in the way that best suits their business. No matter what the size or scope of the organisation, they can also seek recognition of excellence.

Registering bodies (the bodies which register training organisations in each state and territory) work as part of a national system of registration and audit that is outcomes-focused and risk-managed to streamline quality assurance processes.

Section 2 – About this Guideline

Consumers and stakeholders of Vocational Education and Training (VET) must be confident that any complaints they have about the provision of training and assessment products and services will be dealt with efficiently, effectively, transparently and fairly and that any quality issues identified are addressed.

Each registering body is established and accountable for its operations and decisions under state and territory legislation. Each body also operates in accordance with the AQTF 2007 *Standards for State and Territory Registering Bodies* and AQTF 2007 *Standards for State and Territory Accrediting Bodies*.

This AQTF 2007 *National Guideline for Responding to Complaints about Vocational Education and Training Quality* (the Guideline) sets out the approach state or territory registering bodies will take in responding to complaints made about training and assessment products, outcomes and services.

The Guideline explains how state or territory registering bodies will respond to complaints about:

- the training, assessment and other services provided by an RTO
- their own service and actions.

These complaints may be from learners and other clients, industry, and licensing bodies or other stakeholders.

State and territory registering bodies must seek to:

- listen to the views of VET consumers and stakeholders, including those acting on behalf of consumers
- address any concerns that consumers and stakeholders may have
- constantly improve the quality of VET products, services, outcomes and policies.

Operational procedures developed by each registering body are consistent with this Guideline. Further information about operational procedures is available at www.training.com.au/aqtf2007.

This Guideline is one of a number that have been approved by the National Quality Council to support the operation of the national VET system. The registering bodies are working together to ensure that these guidelines are interpreted and implemented consistently. The other guidelines include:

- AQTF 2007 *National Guideline for Managing Non-Compliance*
- AQTF 2007 *National Guideline for Industry Regulator Engagement*
- AQTF 2007 *National Guideline for Risk Management*.

Each guideline is publicly available at www.training.com.au/aqtf2007.

Section 3 – Principles

The following principles underpin the process for responding to complaints about VET quality.

Principle 1 - Equitable

Complaints are considered in a transparent, objective and unbiased manner. The complaints-handling process incorporates the principles of natural justice and procedural fairness.

Principle 2 - Accessible

Information about the complaints-handling process and the means to lodge a complaint is readily accessible and available on the national website: www.training.com.au/aqtf2007.

Principle 3 - Comprehensive

The relevant circumstances and information surrounding a complaint are investigated to the level warranted by the severity of the complaint.

Principle 4 - Responsive

Timeframes for investigating and resolving complaints will be set and monitored.

Principle 5 - Accountable

There is appropriate national monitoring of complaints through regular reporting of complaints received and actions taken. The complaints-handling process is reviewed regularly.

Principle 6 – Confidential

Confidentiality is maintained and anonymity preserved where requested. Complainants will be informed where this may limit the extent to which a complaint can be investigated.

Section 4 – Protocols

Registering bodies observe the following protocols in managing complaints.

4.1 Lodgement of complaints

A complaint may be lodged in person or by telephone, by fax, electronically (for example email) or by letter. A verbal complaint may subsequently need to be made in writing to enable full investigation.

Those with special needs, such as people with limited English language or literacy skills and those with a disability will not be disadvantaged in the complaints process.

4.2 Charges for making a complaint

The complaints process is free of charge.

4.3 Administration of the complaints process

The complaints-handling process is sufficiently resourced and underpinned by internal procedures to ensure that services are provided in accordance with this guideline.

4.4 Complaints outside the authority of a state or territory registering body

Where a complaint is lodged with a registering body, and the complaint is not within that body's authority, the complainant will be referred to the most appropriate authority for handling their complaint. Linkages are maintained between organisations (including other relevant government agencies) to facilitate the referral process and to aid consideration of complaints that raise cross-jurisdictional issues.

Complaints about VET providers that operate in more than one state or territory will be dealt with as described in section 5.1 below and be informed by the AQTF 2007 *National Guideline for Conducting Audits of the Interstate Operations of an RTO*.

4.5 Review of a complaint investigation outcome

Complainants or respondents (including RTOs and other organisations that are the subject of investigation) who are not satisfied with the outcome of a complaint investigation, have the right to request a review of the investigation process or outcomes. This may include a review by the relevant state or territory ombudsman, commissioner, council or review tribunal depending on the jurisdiction in which the registering body operates. Further information is available on the national website at www.training.com.au/aqtf2007.

4.6 Sharing of information

To aid the investigation of a complaint, state and territory registering bodies are authorised to share with other state registering bodies information about an RTO they have registered.

Section 5 – Complaints-handling Process

5.1 Complaints about the services of an RTO

Learners and other clients (including employers or industry bodies) who have a complaint about an RTO should lodge their complaint directly with the RTO. All RTOs have a complaints process in place.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the handling of their complaint by the RTO, or there are extenuating circumstances that preclude the complainant from lodging their complaint directly with the RTO, they may lodge their complaint with the registering body or the **National Training Complaints Hotline**, telephone: **1800 000 674**. Complaints to the National Training Complaints Hotline are referred to the appropriate registering body.

Acknowledgement

The state or territory registering body will acknowledge receipt of a complaint within five (5) working days.

Referrals

If a state or territory registering body receives a complaint about an RTO operating in its jurisdiction that is registered interstate, it will forward the complaint to the registering body in that jurisdiction for investigation and inform the complainant of this. The interstate registering body will investigate the complaint in accordance with this Guideline and inform the registering body that received the complaint of progress so that they can keep the complainant informed about the investigation of their complaint.

For overseas students studying VET in Australia, the provisions of the *Education Services for Overseas Students* (ESOS) Act and related state or territory legislation apply. Accordingly, the investigation process will entail liaison with relevant Australian Government departmental officers who will ensure that relevant provisions of Australian Government legislation are met.

Investigation

The registering body investigating a complaint will inform the complainant of the investigation process and will keep them informed of progress.

The complaint will be investigated by the registering body in accordance with its documented procedures. The RTO that is the subject of the complaint will be informed of the nature of the complaint and given an opportunity to respond. Based on the response from the RTO, the registering body will decide whether to investigate the complaint further, and also the manner and scope of any further investigation.

Legislative requirements, the amount of time that has elapsed before a complaint is lodged and the level of detail provided in complaints lodged anonymously or by third parties may influence the extent to which a complaint can be investigated.

If an audit is conducted to investigate a complaint about an RTO's operation in another jurisdiction, this will be done in accordance with the AQTF 2007 *National Guideline for Conducting Audits of the Interstate Operations of an RTO*.

Reporting

Once the registering body has made a decision in relation to a complaint, within five (5) working days and in accordance with established procedures for disclosure of information, it will inform the parties of the outcomes of its investigation and any actions to be taken. The registering body will also inform the parties of any further avenues they may follow to resolve any outstanding issues arising from the complaint.

If the complaint investigation identifies that an RTO is not operating in compliance with the AQTF 2007 *Essential Standards for Registration*, the registering body will take action in accordance with the AQTF 2007 *National Guideline for Managing Non-Compliance*. This outcome may be taken into account in reviewing the risk rating for the RTO as described in the AQTF 2007 *National Guideline for Risk Management*.

5.2 Complaints from industry regulators

Because of the risk associated with the delivery of training for licensed occupations, particular arrangements have been made to deal with complaints lodged by licensing bodies.

Acknowledgement

The state or territory registering body will acknowledge the complaint within five (5) working days of receipt and nominate a senior officer to be the contact person for the regulatory body.

In the case of fraud and corruption related to the assessment and issuance of qualifications the response timeframe will be within 24 hours.

Investigation

The registering body will invite the licensing body to participate in the complaint investigation. The licensing body may participate by:

- providing information and advice to the registering body
- nominating technical advisers to join an audit team
- other means agreed between the registering body and the industry regulatory body.

The complaint will be investigated by the registering body in accordance with documented procedures and timeframes agreed for reporting progress to the licensing body.

If an interstate audit is conducted to investigate the complaint, this will be done in accordance with the AQTF 2007 *National Guideline for Conducting Audits of the Interstate Operations of an RTO*.

Reporting

The registering body will inform the licensing body of the outcome of the investigation within five (5) working days of the investigation being finalised.

Appeals

If the licensing body is not satisfied with the outcome of the complaint investigation, it may raise its concerns with the manager of the registering body. If the licensing body remains dissatisfied with the outcome or actions of the registering body it may raise its concerns with the Chair of the governing body. Links to governing bodies are available at website www.training.com.au/aqtf2007.

5.3 Complaints about the services and actions of a state or territory registering body

If a stakeholder of vocational education and training wishes to make a complaint about a state or territory registering body they should lodge their complaint directly with the registering body. All registering bodies have a complaints process in place.

Acknowledgement

A complaint will be acknowledged within five (5) working days.

Investigation

The complaint will be investigated by a senior manager of the registering body in accordance with its published procedures.

Reporting

Once the registering body has made a decision in relation to the complaint, it will, within five (5) working days, inform the complainant of the outcome and any actions to be taken.

Appeals

If the stakeholder is not satisfied with the outcome of the complaint investigation, the registering body will indicate further avenues of complaint or appeal to follow. These further avenues may include lodging the complaint with the Chair of the governing body, or using the processes available through each state and territory government for complaints relating to government services such as the Ombudsman.

AQTF 2007 National Publications

Registered Training Organisations will use these documents

AQTF 2007 Essential Standards for Registration

The Essential Standards apply to all RTOs from 1 July 2007. This publication lists AQTF 2007 requirements for RTOs including:

- three standards relating to training and assessment, client services and management systems
- a set of RTO quality indicators
- Conditions of Registration.

AQTF 2007 Users' Guide to the Essential Standards for Registration

This guide assists RTOs, registering bodies and auditors to interpret and apply the standards.

State and Territory Registering Bodies will use these documents

AQTF 2007 Standards for State and Territory Registering Bodies

This document lists the standards that apply to the Registering Bodies in each state and territory. It includes:

- three standards
- quality indicators for assessing registering body performance
- a set of operational protocols to ensure national recognition of registration decisions.

AQTF 2007 National Guideline for Risk Management

This guideline describes the nationally consistent risk management approach to be used by all state and territory registering bodies in decisions about scheduling and scope of audits.

AQTF 2007 National Guideline for Audit Moderation

This guideline provides a framework for capacity building and for the development and continuous improvement of auditor performance. It describes the moderation processes used to ensure that auditors have a consistent approach to audit.

AQTF 2007 National Guideline for Managing Non-Compliance

This guideline describes the nationally consistent approach each registering body uses to respond to the outcomes of audit that highlight any non-compliance with the *AQTF 2007 Essential Standards for Registration*.

AQTF 2007 National Guideline for Industry Regulator Engagement

This guideline describes how industry regulators can be engaged in the quality assurance arrangements. It sets out the roles and responsibilities of the registering bodies and regulators and includes a set of principles, protocols and options for industry engagement.

AQTF 2007 National Guideline for Responding to Complaints about Vocational Education and Training Quality

This guideline describes the nationally agreed complaint handling process available to resolve concerns about Vocational Education and Training Quality. It sets out principles, protocols and responses for investigating and resolving complaints and learning from the outcomes.

Auditors will use this document

AQTF 2007 Audit Handbook

This handbook is a key tool for auditors in applying the outcomes-focused audit model. The handbook describes the principles that underpin a nationally consistent, risk-managed approach to AQTF 2007 audits.

Auditors will also use the *AQTF 2007 Essential Standards for Registration* and the *AQTF 2007 Users' Guide to the Essential Standards for Registration*.

AQTF 2007 is underpinned by the principle of transparency. All stakeholders in the VET system should have access to documents detailing the different components of AQTF 2007. All national documents are available for download from the national website: www.training.com.au/aqtf2007.

Excellence Criteria are effective from 1 January 2008. The Excellence Criteria focus on encouraging and recognising overall high performance in training providers. Application for assessment against the Excellence Criteria is voluntary. The full suite of Excellence Criteria documents is also available from www.training.com.au/aqtf2007.

