

# Benchmarking of the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma in the Australian Education System

## SUMMARY REPORT



**The SQA Advanced Certificate is considered comparable to the AQF Diploma (AQF Level 5). The SQA Advanced Diploma is considered comparable to the AQF Advanced Diploma and the Associate degree (AQF Level 6). Both may be considered for credit exemptions on a par with AQF Level 5 (Year 1) and Level 6 (Years 1-2 depending on the subject of study) awards, at institutional discretion.**

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### 1. Overview of the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diplomas

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Advanced Certificate and Advanced Diploma<sup>1</sup> are higher education qualifications developed in partnership with colleges, universities and industry. The SQA Advanced qualifications are offered internationally in a range of subjects including but not limited to: accounting, architectural technology, art and design, business, chemical engineering, computing (with various specialisations), construction management, electronics, hospitality, hospitality management, mechanical engineering, quantity surveying, retail and retail management and travel and tourism.

This report is designed to provide guidance on the comparable academic standing of the two awards in the context of the Australian education system.

#### Entry and duration

The SQA Advanced Certificate is a one-year programme, allocated 96 SCQF Points (960 notional learning hours). Entry requirements are set at the discretion of individual centres but may include National/Scottish Vocational Qualifications (N/SVQ 2 or 3), other qualifications at Level 5 or 6 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), comparable work experience, or a centre-devised test. Programmes are assessed in English and as such entrants who are non-native speakers will typically also need an ESOL certificate at SCQF level 5 or an IELTS band 5.5 for admission.

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<sup>1</sup> Previously known as the SQA Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND).  
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Entry into an SQA Advanced Diploma course, which typically consists of two years of study<sup>2</sup>, is the same as the entry requirements specified above. The first year comprises 1200 notional learning hours, with the total Diploma worth 240 SCQF Credit Points (2400 notional learning hours). Those already holding the SQA Advanced Certificate may enter the second year of the SQA Advanced Diploma programme.

### Structure and content

The SQA Advanced qualifications have a unit-based structure<sup>3</sup>. Each subject has mandatory units, taken by all students, and a range of optional units allowing students to specialise in a particular area. For example, those undertaking the SQA Advanced Certificate in Hospitality would be expected to develop a general understanding of the hospitality industry and then specialise in hospitality management, professional cookery or events. Similarly those taking an SQA Advanced Certificate or Diploma in Business would have the opportunity to specialise in aspects of accounting and finance, business culture, communication – research skills, customer service, e-commerce, economics, enterprise and employability, financial services, human resource management, information technology, international business, legal, management skills, marketing/sales, mathematics and statistics, office skills, personal and social development, public administration, supply chain management or sustainability.

### Aims and learning outcomes

Aims are generally stated for each subject group, and can be broadly summarised as follows:

- To ensure students will be prepared for employment
- To develop study and research skills
- To develop transferable skills including Core Skills for employment: communication, numeracy, information and communication technology, problem solving and working with others.

Specific aims are also set for each award, detailing the subject-specific knowledge and skills that should be developed.

The SQA Advanced Certificate is placed at Level 7 of the SCQF, and the SQA Advanced Diploma at Level 8, where students at these levels should be able to demonstrate knowledge and skills such as the following:

	Indicators of SCQF Level 7 (Advanced Certificate)	Indicators of SCQF Level 8 (Advanced Diploma)
Knowledge and understanding	Demonstrate and/or work with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An overall appreciation of the body of knowledge that constitutes a subject/discipline/sector.</li> <li>• Knowledge that is embedded in the main theories, concepts and principles of the subject / discipline / sector.</li> <li>• An awareness of the dynamic nature of knowledge and understanding.</li> <li>• An understanding of the difference between explanations based on evidence and/or research and other sources, and of the importance of this difference.</li> </ul>	Demonstrate and/or work with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A knowledge of the scope, defining features, and main areas of the subject / discipline / sector.</li> <li>• Specialist knowledge in some areas.</li> <li>• A discerning understanding of a defined range of core theories, concepts, principles and terminology.</li> <li>• Awareness and understanding of some major current issues and specialisms.</li> <li>• Awareness and understanding of research and equivalent scholarly/academic processes.</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Qualifications Authority, "Guide to SQA Advanced Qualifications," 3.

<sup>3</sup> There is a fixed and a non-fixed framework for some of the SQA Advanced qualifications. Both frameworks have the same credit requirements; however the construction of the latter is more flexible and individual centres can choose to create their own content and structure, using guidelines provided by SQA.

	Indicators of SCQF Level 7 (Advanced Certificate)	Indicators of SCQF Level 8 (Advanced Diploma)
Practice: Applied knowledge, skills and understanding	<p>Apply knowledge, skills and understanding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In practical contexts.</li> <li>• In using some of the basic and routine professional skills, techniques, practices and/or materials associated with the subject/discipline/sector.</li> <li>• To practise these in both routine and non-routine contexts.</li> </ul>	<p>Apply knowledge, skills and understanding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In using a range of professional skills, techniques, practices and/or materials associated with the subject/discipline/sector, a few of which are advanced and/or complex.</li> <li>• In carrying out routine lines of enquiry, development or investigation into professional level problems and issues.</li> <li>• To adapt routine practices within accepted standards.</li> </ul>
Generic cognitive skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present and evaluate arguments, information and ideas that are routine to a subject/discipline/sector.</li> <li>• Use a range of approaches to address defined and/or routine problems and issues within familiar contexts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undertake critical analysis, evaluation and/or synthesis of ideas, concepts, information and issues that are within the common understandings in a subject/discipline/sector.</li> <li>• Use a range of approaches to formulate and critically evaluate evidence-based solutions/responses to defined and/or routine problems and issues.</li> </ul>
Communication, ICT and numeracy skills	<p>Use a wide range of routine skills and some advanced skills associated with a subject/discipline/sector, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convey complex ideas in well-structured and coherent form.</li> <li>• Use a range of forms of communication effectively in both familiar and unfamiliar contexts.</li> <li>• Select and use standard ICT applications to process and obtain a variety of information and data.</li> <li>• Use a range of numerical and graphical skills in combination.</li> <li>• Use numerical and graphical data to measure progress and achieve goals/targets.</li> </ul>	<p>Use a wide range of routine skills and some advanced and specialised skills associated with a subject/discipline/sector, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convey complex information to a range of audiences and for a range of purposes.</li> <li>• Use a range of standard ICT applications to process and obtain data.</li> <li>• Use and evaluate numerical and graphical data to measure progress and achieve goals/targets.</li> </ul>
Autonomy, accountability and working with others	<p>Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities at a professional level in practice or in a subject/discipline/sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept supervision in less familiar areas of work.</li> <li>• Exercise some managerial or supervisory responsibility for the work of others within a defined and supervised structure.</li> <li>• Manage limited resources within defined areas of work.</li> <li>• Take the lead in implementing agreed plans in familiar or defined contexts.</li> <li>• Take account of own and others' roles and responsibilities when carrying out and evaluating tasks.</li> <li>• Work, under guidance, with others to acquire an understanding of current professional practice.</li> </ul>	<p>Exercise autonomy and initiative in some activities at a professional level in practice or in a subject/discipline/sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercise managerial responsibility for the work of others within a defined structure.</li> <li>• Manage resources within defined areas of work.</li> <li>• Take the lead on planning in familiar or defined contexts.</li> <li>• Practise in ways that show awareness of own and others' roles, responsibilities and contributions when carrying out and evaluating tasks.</li> <li>• Work, under guidance, with others to acquire an understanding of current professional practice.</li> <li>• Manage, under guidance, ethical and professional issues in accordance with current professional and/or ethical codes or practices</li> </ul>

### Assessment and grading

The methods of assessment vary by subject and by centre; however these may include open-book assessments such as case studies, practical exercises and observations, written projects, portfolios, and oral presentations. SQA provides clear guidance to centres on designing valid and reliable assessments. For example, the Business Graded Unit 1, taken in both the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma, is assessed by a three hour closed-book examination consisting of two papers based on a previously seen case study. The Business Graded Unit 2, done towards the end of the SQA Advanced Diploma course is a project where candidates are given a real or simulated business problem to evaluate.

Students receive a final certificate and accompanying transcript detailing the units undertaken. Generally, units are graded on a pass or fail basis, with the exception of graded units which are marked out of 100 and are given a letter grade; C (50%) is the minimum pass grade.<sup>4</sup>

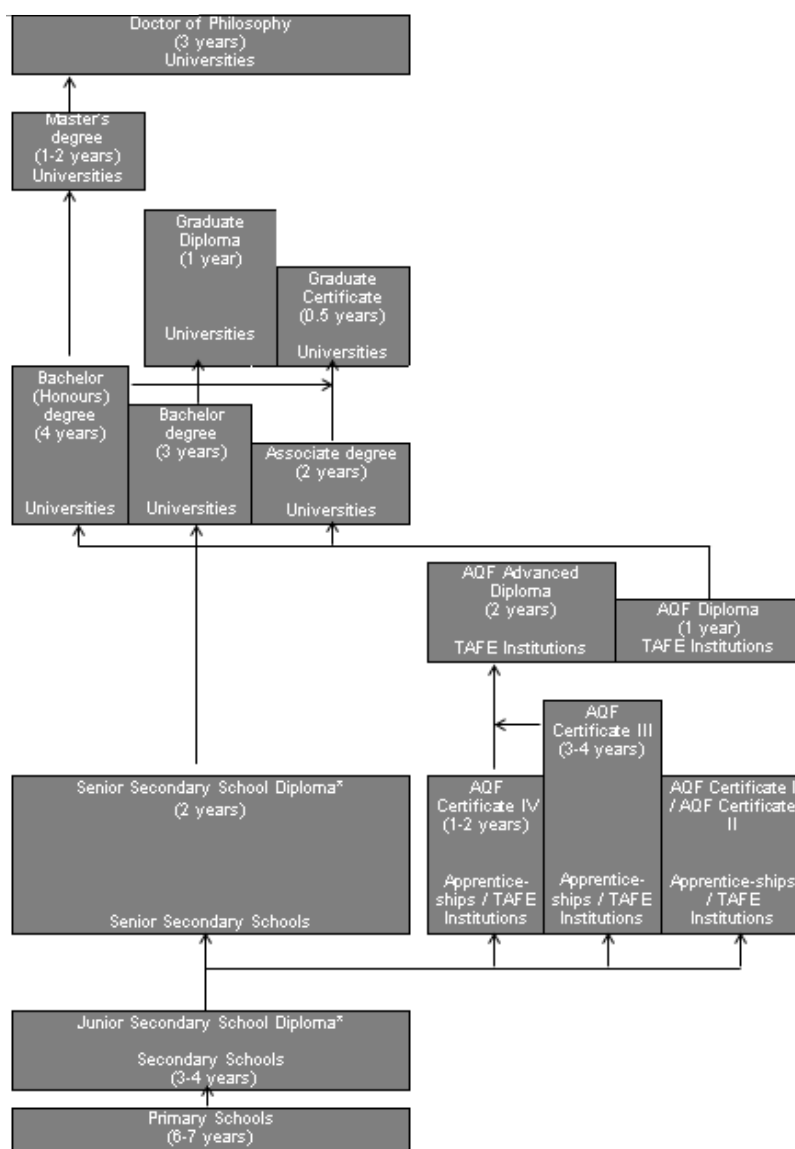
### Certification and progression

On successful completion, candidates are awarded an SQA Advanced Certificate or an Advanced Diploma in their field of study. SQA Advanced Certificate holders may advance to further study, including to the second year of an SQA Advanced Diploma. SQA has a Diploma to Degree programme<sup>5</sup> to support progression for holders of the SQA Advanced Diploma to the second or third year of study at an SQA Progression Partner university.

## 2. Comparative analysis with the Australian education system

Education and training in Australia is administered at both national level and within each state or territory. Responsibility for education and training is shared between all of the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, including the Department of Education and Training, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and Australian Skills Quality Authority.

The overall structure of the Australian system can be seen below:



As shown in the chart, the AQF Diploma, AQF Advanced Diploma and the Associate degree are the most similar in terms of entry requirements and progression routes to the SQA Advanced qualifications. The AQF Diploma and Advanced Diploma programmes are offered by technical and further education institutions (TAFE), as well as universities; while the Associate degree is an undergraduate programme offered at universities and TAFEs.

The AQF Diploma, Advanced Diploma and the Associate degree are offered in a range of applied, technical and vocational subjects. Entry requirements for these Australian qualifications are broadly comparable to the SQA Advanced qualifications. For both sets, specific entry requirements vary and they are determined by individual institutes. Courses offered by four Australian institutes were reviewed for the purpose of this analysis and completion of Year 12 or equivalent is stated as one of the main requirements for admission. It is also possible to enter selected AQF Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas on the basis of work experience of a vocational award such as the Certificate III or IV – which are considered comparable to SCQF Levels 5/6/7. The AQF Diploma typically takes one to two years to complete (1200 notional learning hours), similar to the SQA Advanced Certificate which is a one year programme. The typical duration for the AQF Advanced Diploma is 1.5-2 years (2400 hours); taking into consideration the entry requirements and duration, the SQA Advanced Diploma most closely compares with the AQF Advanced Diploma.

Clear similarities can also be seen between the structure of the SQA Advanced Certificate and AQF Level 5 programmes; and the SQA Advanced Diploma and AQF Level 6 programmes. Both typically consist of core units covering fundamental areas of knowledge in the chosen course and elective units in specific pathways or areas of specialisation. There may also be an applied element – for example, review of an Australian Associate degree in Business found that, similar to SQA’s graded units, the Associate degree has two units designated for work integrated learning, which allow students to apply skills learnt through the course in practice. This unitised structure is similar to the structure in place for the SQA Advanced qualifications. A range of learning modes is used in the Australian qualifications, including face-to-face learning, online learning and a combination of the two. Some programmes also include work placements or simulated work placements. As with the SQA Advanced qualifications, the mode of learning for the AQF awards differs according to the subject of specialisation.

When comparing learning outcomes, reference can be made to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), a framework used throughout the education system in Australia. The AQF comprises ten levels and is used to provide standards for Australian qualifications, as indicated in the table below.

AQF Level	Qualification Type
10	Doctoral degree
9	Master’s degree
8	Bachelor Honours degree; Graduate Certificate; Graduate Diploma
7	Bachelor degree
6	Advanced Diploma; Associate degree
5	Diploma
4	Certificate IV
3	Certificate III
2	Certificate II
1	Certificate I

As with the SCQF in Scotland, the AQF has level descriptors which set out the knowledge and skills typically expected at each level. These include learning outcomes which are recognised and transferrable in the AQF such as: fundamental skills, such as literacy and numeracy appropriate to the level and qualification type; people skills, such as working with others and communication skills; thinking skills, such as learning to learn, decision making and problem solving; and personal skills, such as self-direction and acting with integrity; similar to the transferable Core Skills found within the SCQF.

There are additionally descriptors for both qualification types. UK NARIC's review of the descriptors found that the expectations at SCQF Level 7 (SQA Advanced Certificate) best reflect those at AQF Level 5. At both levels, students would be expected to demonstrate technical and theoretical knowledge of their chosen subject and be able to apply this to routine and non-routine situations. At Level 8 of the SCQF, where the SQA Advanced Diploma is situated, students would be expected to have specialist knowledge in their chosen area and be able to apply this in a range of contexts for skilled work or further study; and be able to apply and/or adapt this knowledge to sometimes complex contexts.

UK NARIC also reviewed some programme-level learning outcomes, finding that the SQA Advanced qualification generic outcomes were well reflected in the Australian programme expectations that graduates would have the ability to gather and analyse information; to apply problem-solving processes in new situations; to use professional knowledge and skills effectively; and be able to plan their own work, be self-directed, and use interpersonal skills and attitudes to also work collaboratively.

The approach to assessment for the Australian qualifications was found to be similar to the approach used for SQA Advanced qualifications. Methods used may include projects, practical demonstrations or observations, oral and written questions, as well as classroom-based and work placement tasks.

As with the SQA Advanced qualification, successful completion of the Australian qualifications leads to candidates being awarded a Diploma, Advanced Diploma or an Associate degree certificate within their chosen field of study. The associated outcomes of the Australian and SQA qualifications are broadly comparable. The AQF Qualifications Pathways Policy provides some guidance on articulation to undergraduate studies stating that holders of an AQF Diploma may be able to achieve 25% credit towards a four-year Bachelor degree or 33% to a three-year degree. Holders of the AQF Advanced Diploma or Associate degree may be eligible for 37.5% credit towards a four-year degree, or 50% towards a three-year Bachelor degree.

Overall the SQA Advanced Certificate and AQF Diploma; and SQA Advanced Diploma and AQF Advanced Diploma respectively, demonstrate clear similarities in terms of entry requirements, structure, learning outcomes (as described in the SCQF and AQF descriptors) and modes of learning and assessment. On this basis, the SQA Advanced Certificate may be considered comparable to the AQF Diploma and provide direct entry to the second year of a degree. Graduates of the AQF Diploma can gain direct entry to a Bachelor degree with advanced standing or credit up to one year at institutional discretion.

### **3. Key findings**

The SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma are found to be well-designed and internationally-relevant programmes, noting in particular that they:

- Are developed with colleges, universities and employers – the qualification design process includes consultation with key external stakeholders designed and reference to National Occupational Standards, to help ensure the relevance of the SQA qualifications to learners and to labour market needs
- Have established progression routes in key destination countries including but not limited to the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, enabling students to top-up, with further study, to a Bachelor degree in a number of universities

- Provide career-focussed, practical learning: integrating core skills relevant to employment and with a structure that provides a well-rounded overview of the subject area as well as a specialisation through its combination of optional and mandatory units.

In the context of the Australian education system, the SQA Advanced Certificate can be considered comparable to the AQF Diploma in Australia or the first year of a Bachelor degree, and may therefore provide advanced standing to the second year of a degree programme at institutional discretion. The SQA Advanced Diploma can be considered comparable to the AQF Advanced Diploma and the Associate degree at Level 6 and accordingly may be considered for similar exemptions to Bachelor degree programmes at institutional discretion.

#### **4. Methodology**

Based on UK NARIC's well-established methodology for credential evaluation, this independent benchmarking study comprised a review of the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma as well as national awards in the Australian education system. This took into consideration the following core criteria:

- Entry requirements
- Duration
- Structure and content
- Modes of learning and assessment
- Learning outcomes
- Associated outcomes.

Relevant information on the Australian education system and comparable qualifications was obtained from UK NARIC's *International Comparisons* database and official websites of Australian education authorities and institutions.