

Jobs and Skills Australia

National Skills Taxonomy

Discussion Paper

The University of Adelaide and University of South Australia Joint Submission

9 August 2024

Introduction

Universities play a crucial role as the nexus between research, teaching, the future workforce, industry, and government. Part of this role is ensuring universities are educating, training, upskilling and reskilling people from all demographics, and in all sectors crucial to the prosperity, culture(s), and wellbeing of society.

Establishing a National Skills Taxonomy (NST) that effectively links university and broader higher education teaching offerings to critical industry skills needs and informs effective government policy and planning to these ends, is crucial.

The University of Adelaide and University of South Australia are in the process of building a future-focused university, Adelaide University, that will combine the strengths of both institutions to deliver nation-leading curriculum, student experience and greater access to education, as well as world-class, industry-relevant and innovative research.

Adelaide University will drive the innovation and scale needed to make transformational investments for South Australia, the nation and beyond. Upon opening, the new institution is expected to be the largest educator of domestic students in Australia and will have the scale and resources to be sustainably positioned in the top 100 universities in the world. It will also have a diversified international education reach. A key component of the new university's vision and strategies is the Adelaide Attainment Model which will drive access and equity in delivering its new curriculum through features such as modular and stackable learning, a flexible academic calendar, a digital underpinning that embraces AI technologies, work integrated learning, and common core courses across all degree programs, along with embedded graduate qualities to ensure strong employability.

The University of Adelaide and University of South Australia are therefore pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this consultation, which outlines some key principles that should be adopted in developing an effective NST, the uses and benefits of a NST to the university sector and, most importantly, to students, and some key considerations in the designing and implementation of a purposeful NST.

The principles of an effective NST

The University of Adelaide (UoA) and University of South Australia (UniSA) support the introduction of a National Skills Taxonomy that improves the higher education sector's ability to effectively deliver the necessary skills required by Australian industries.

To foster a flexible and responsive skills system that enables skills providers, supports students and employees throughout their careers, and delivers workforce upskilling and reskilling to empower Australian industry, a National Skills Taxonomy should be:

- **Student-centred** - while the consultation paper highlights the use cases for various stakeholders, a strong student-centred perspective should be at the core of its design and implementation. As educators with a strong commitment to the success of our students, the primary focus should be on how this taxonomy can benefit students to establish their careers out of high-school and continue to develop and transition their professional and occupational contributions as life-long learners.

- **Globally relevant** - in an increasingly globalised and remote world of work, Australian students and employees need to be prepared for international careers, or at least careers with organisations that have an international presence. An effective NST in Australia will need to align strongly with international standards and be translatable across transnational industries to facilitate global mobility for students and workers.
- **Respectful of diversity and inclusive** – equity, inclusivity, and diversity should underpin the language used to identify skills and the ways in which skills are understood through the NST to ensure they are respectful and inclusive.
- **Transparent** – building transparency into the NST through accessibility of the system, data, and language, will be critical to establishing the NST as a holistic system that removes barriers between sectors and jurisdictions and facilitates transferability of skills and workforces as requirements change.

Further, whatever system is put in place to track, monitor, and implement a NST and/or a complimentary National Skills Passport, must be funded by the Commonwealth Government, with assured commitment to maintain appropriate resourcing over the long term. This will require a significant resource commitment that cannot fall to skills providers.

Use cases and benefits to universities, educators, employees and students

A well designed and implemented National Skills Taxonomy will create a more coordinated approach for education providers, individuals, and employers through the establishment of common terminology for skills, standards that are translatable across industries, sectors and jurisdictions, and transparency that creates equity across stakeholders, all of which will improve clarity but also help to foster a shared understanding and value of credentials.

For universities as educators, the NST would help enhance our capacity to contribute to a well-informed ecosystem of jobs, workforce forecasts, skills forecasts, and qualifications under the Australian Qualifications Framework (and potentially through expert advice and leadership of the to-be-established Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC)). This would enable education providers to align curriculum and training offerings more accurately with industry needs. Coordination with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Statistics New Zealand and aligning a NST and their Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) framework would ensure classifications maintain currency. This will ensure skills definitions and classifications are updated regularly to reflect changes in the labour market and capture emerging industry trends for continued alignment of curriculum and industry needs over time.

For universities as organisations, a robust NST would support the effective and efficient assessment of prospective staff's skills and qualifications, while also assisting student enrolment assessments which include the Recognition of Prior Learning and credit transfer. For organisations in general, a NST should be capable of supporting clearer assessment of skills with measurable levels that are comparable across industries.

Regarding individuals – students and employees – commonality of language in referring to skills across sectors and jurisdictions would help to overcome the challenge of identifying the skills they

need and articulating those they have developed to make effective career decisions. This is particularly relevant as employees move across industries (and national borders) more frequently, and as students adjust to a changing higher education landscape that is increasingly based on modular curriculums across a more interconnected tertiary education sector – as is envisioned in the Universities Accord Final Report. A standardisation of skills taxonomies would support students to plan their careers and lifelong learning journeys, particularly in relation to changing industries and the technological advancements and potential impact of AI on skills needs.

A national, shared, taxonomy also supports the Commonwealth Government’s concept of a National Skills Passport – which would further support learners, providers, and employers to identify and validate skill and pursue opportunities for skills transfer more easily. Meaningful coordination of the NST with development of a Skills Passport would support an integrated national framework that is consistent, clear and user friendly for students and the sector. Implementation of more than one system designed to support skills management will undermine viability and value.

If designed effectively, better aligned curriculum offerings to support industry needs has the potential to reduce the uptake of education products that do not lead to meaningful employment. This would be beneficial to both the Commonwealth government in reducing debts accrued via HECS-HELP / FEE-HELP, as well as individuals repaying debts as they experience greater cost of living pressures.

Potential Challenges to establishing the NST

Quality assurance, academic integrity, common standards, and learner-driven approaches create value of credentials. However, how credentials within a taxonomy are assessed for these characteristics may be challenging and/or divisive. How implementation of a national system to encapsulate, track and monitor these credentials for learners, and how/who maintains it may also prove challenging.

Also, with new entrants to the field offering an increasing number of credentials, it will be important to understand who will create the framework to determine what is included in a NST (and what is not). The rapid rate of change of technology may also create challenges in keeping a NST current.

Effective standardisation and translatability of a NST will need to take into consideration variances deriving from state-based legislation that impact certain professions. Licensing and registration requirements, and the mandating of professional standards and codes of conduct, for example, may differ from state to state and a means to translate their relevance in each legal setting is required.

Design, Development and Implementation Considerations

For a National Skills Taxonomy to be effective, the Universities suggest the following design, development and implementation aspects be considered:

- As the skills-focused framework will look to create a standardisation of ways in which academic rigor and integrity can be maintained, there is a risk of oversimplifying complex academic concepts into discrete skills;

- In an increasingly complex world, interdisciplinary skills are crucial. The taxonomy should explicitly address how it will capture and promote interdisciplinary skills that are vital for innovation and problem-solving and are aligned to contemporary and future workplaces;
- While the discussion paper mentions the need to include emerging skills, it doesn't provide a clear mechanism for identifying and incorporating skills from rapidly evolving fields like AI, biotechnology, data analytics or sustainable energy;
- Translatability of international credentials and qualifications, and skills taxonomies to the NST will offer advantages for Australian education providers and employers in sectors reliant on student and workforce mobility;
- Scaffolding of clear requirements of attainment against levels of qualifications, similarly to what the Australian Qualifications Framework enabled, could provide greater fluidity between and across education (higher education, vocational education, secondary school and industry-/experience-based skills attainment), however the associated inadvertent risks of creating unwanted hierarchy would need to be addressed;
- Given the above, it would be valuable to ensure International English Language Testing System (IELTS) qualifications are embedded into a NST;
- Authority over the validation and verification processes of the NST should be appropriately assigned in order to increase reliability and trust in the system, as should responsibilities for determining what is and is not included in the NST;
- A NST should be interoperable and integrated with existing data systems relevant to its use and help to inform sector- and nation-wide decision making in workforce planning and curriculum building and delivery;
- Connectivity to an AI tool that is nationally or globally accepted/validated would enable ongoing currency and portability; and
- Embedding ongoing governance and quality assurance.

Further, in developing the NST it is crucial to include and adequately define a skills category for cultural competency. Cultural competency is an essential skill that enables individuals and organisations to interact effectively with people of diverse cultures, and more specifically, to build genuine and respectful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The NST should define cultural competency at various proficiency levels, ranging from basic awareness to advanced application. This granularity ensures that individuals and organisations can identify and develop the appropriate level of cultural competency needed for different roles and contexts. Aligning cultural competency with existing frameworks and standards that emphasise inclusion ensures consistency and enhances the NST's relevance in promoting equitable and inclusive practices across various sectors.

Summary

The University of Adelaide and University of South Australia are supportive of the development of a NST that is user-driven in its design, strategically integrated and interoperable to facilitate the well-informed coordination of skills delivery and acquisition between education providers, industry, students, and employees.

This contribution outlines the importance of building a NST with key principles at its foundation including being transparent for users, being globally relevant, and being student-centred. For the benefits of more effective workforce planning between universities, government, and industry, and for improved career decision making for individuals throughout studies and lifelong learning to be

realised, design aspects such as translatability, standardisation, reliability and trust, validation and currency are crucial. Just as important is ensuring the NST takes into consideration how it will address interdisciplinary skills, cultural competency skills, and the inclusion of international qualifications and IELTS skills.

Our universities are in the process of developing the new, innovative curriculum of Adelaide University through the Adelaide Attainment Model, and with the intention of becoming the largest provider of university education to domestic students, an effective NST would help ensure our learning offerings support Australians and Australian industry to have access to the skills required to remain prosperous.

Contacts

For more information, please contact:

Professor Jessica Gallagher
Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (External Engagement)
The University of Adelaide
T: +61 8 8313 4659
E: dvcee@adelaide.edu.au

Mr Alan Brideson
Chief of Staff, Office of the Vice Chancellor
University of South Australia
T: +61 8 830 20625
E: Alan.Brideson@unisa.edu.au