

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

QUEENSLAND PILOT PROGRAM OF THE PROPOSED NATIONAL CERTIFICATION FRAMEWORK 2012



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ABSTRACT

The Queensland Water Directorate (*qldwater*) through its Water Skills Partnership Program has commenced an initiative which takes the first tangible steps towards a Certification program for Drinking Water Treatment Operators in Queensland. The Pilot, in partnership with WIOA, is being delivered as part of national efforts to test the National Certification Framework under the oversight of the Water Industry Skills Taskforce. Similar trials have commenced in NSW.

Around 25 to 30 individual operators from 5 different organisations (Seqwater, Toowoomba Regional Council, Bundaberg Regional Council, Longreach Regional Council and Wujal Wujal Aboriginal Shire Council) are participating in the Pilot.

The two key drivers for this work are: to provide better access to nationally benchmarked training and professional development, including for operators in smaller organisations and in rural and remote areas; and to establish clear career paths in the industry including formal recognition of the skills and expertise of the State's many long-serving operators.

The support for a future Certification program is significant, including recognition as a key initiative in the State's 30 Year Water Sector Strategy. Water service provision across Queensland is challenging, and this initiative has the potential to provide real public health benefits in the long term, for a relatively small initial investment.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In June 2011, the National Water Commission (NWC) appointed Government Skills Australia to create a "framework for the certification of operators in potable water treatment facilities".

The project process was conducted over the subsequent nine months, and included an extensive consultation framework involving both a national steering committee and many key industry stakeholders. The Framework developed has received strong industry support, especially in Queensland, where improving access to skills and appropriate recognition and career paths for experienced operators is seen as crucial for managing drinking water quality into the future.

The project report and "Proposed National Certification Framework for Operators within Drinking Water Treatment Systems" was finally released by NWC in December 2012. In the absence of an identified Australian Government "Owner" for the framework, the national Water Industry Skills Taskforce (WIST), hosted by the Australian Water Association, has been given carriage of the framework, and is leading efforts to see national adoption.

In October 2013, *qldwater* offered to seek participants for the first pilot project to investigate implementation of the draft national framework.

The project quickly received the support of the Queensland Water Skills Partnership group, where industry participants agreed to:

- Participate in the national activities and promote the idea of a consistent national framework;
- Support the national framework as drafted, but recognise that testing the framework through pilot programs was important, given that the implementation plan originally proposed in the framework report did not proceed;
- Support WIST as the interim framework owner, and the framework report's recommendations on the longer term framework owner (clearly assigned and independent of the certifying body);
- Support the proposed WIST position on future certification body/ bodies which would see the number limited and managed through a competitive tender process;
- Support lobbying for a mandatory approach to implementation – incentivised nationally and regulated at a State and Territory level;
- Stress to the Queensland regulator (Department of Energy and Water Supply) that achieving resolution of the method for determining a "system complexity rating" criteria was an important priority and encourage DEWS' participation in the national discussions to be convened.

A project plan including agreed milestones was developed in early 2014.

2.0 DISCUSSION

The draft National Certification Framework seeks to provide an “assurance to regulators, communities and consumers that operators are competent to manage drinking water quality, as well as being capable of identifying and responding to water quality risks and incidents.” This is to be achieved by establishing “a set of nationally consistent criteria that defines and recognises the minimum level of competency and capability required of operators who treat and/ or sample drinking water for human consumption to ensure that it is safe.” (Government Skills Australia 2012)

In simple and practical terms, a “Certifying Body” applies the Framework to assess whether an individual operator holds the required competencies, mapped against the National Water Training Package. That operator can only be “certified” once training for each unit process for which they are responsible is completed in accordance with the national Vocational Education and Training framework. While the Certifying Body’s role in this pilot has involved a degree of advice and discretion, the VET quality framework underpins the assessment.

While a desire to improve public health underpins the need, the Framework objectives cannot hope to capture the challenges inherent in making this program work. The *gldwater* approach has been to focus on the people involved in this critical community service – recognising the skills that already exist and the key benefits to the workforce and employers generally that will be realised through successful implementation of Certification.

The original “spirit” of the draft Framework has been observed at all times during this pilot work. While a more complete paper will be presented in future with the benefit of final results, the following represents a point-in-time assessment of the Queensland pilot.

2.1 Regulatory Environment

The project steering group, employers and participants have consistently agreed that it is important to maintain national consistency in approaches to ensure portability among employees within the industry as well as realise other benefits including political and financial support. Implementation “issues” with the draft Framework are to be identified with the interim Framework owner with a view to resolving them across jurisdictions, as each State and Territory is responsible for drinking water regulation.

At the time of writing, the likely national approach to “system complexity ratings” remains unclear and there is some contention over how valid the approach will be in a number of jurisdictions. Essentially, a plant with a higher complexity rating would mean that the operator would likely require additional, higher level training units in order to be certified.

While the pilot has effectively assessed in broad terms the number of systems likely to exist in each draft category, it does not impact on the employers or participants involved.

The Queensland regulator (DEWS) has been substantially involved since the commencement of the work. A mandatory approach to a minimum standard for both low and medium complexity systems is strongly supported at officer level, but by no means an assured outcome with the State’s current “red tape reduction” targets making any new mandatory requirements difficult to achieve. A business case to support the approach will be produced as part of this work.

2.2 Characteristics of the Industry/ Scope of the Need

Data gathered to date suggests that early estimates of the number of operators likely to be captured by a fully implemented Certification program were higher than now believed. As a result, *qldwater* now estimates that:

- there are 589 total estimated staff to be captured by the Framework
- this includes 84 supervisors, 78 of whom are “qualified” and 505 operators, 403 of whom are “qualified.”

Further, there are an estimated 359 total systems state-wide comprising 174 low complexity and 186 at medium complexity.

There are significant training gaps. Unless an operator has recently completed a qualification, that person is unlikely to hold some “mandatory” units of competency for both low and medium complexity systems, for example NWP279A “Demonstrate knowledge of the risk management principles of the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines”.

It is extremely important that Certification both provides rigour for newer employees in the industry, but also recognises the skills of existing staff. On paper, “recognition of prior learning” is available within the VET framework to address these needs. In practice, Registered Training Organisations can have very different approaches to both this process and to training delivery. Selection of training providers will be influenced by these approaches.

2.3 Selection of Participants

Four organisations initially volunteered to provide staff as part of the project with others agreeing to participate as members of the steering group. Wujal Wujal Aboriginal Shire Council was added later as WIOA had identified an officer there who had already taken a number of steps towards being certified under the existing Victorian voluntary framework.

Between 25 and 30 operators are expected to be involved representing organisations of varying sizes, but also treatment systems servicing communities of varying sizes and remoteness. The selected group, and linkages to other *qldwater* projects is expected to provide very useful insights into what will be required for a fully implemented program.

2.4 Certifying Body and Process

WIOA was selected as the Certifying Body for the Queensland Pilot based on its significant experience and expertise with Certification in Victoria, existing close association with *qldwater*, and demonstrated capacity to deliver on the program in a relatively short timeframe. The idea that a transparent selection process be undertaken for independent Certifying bodies for a broader scale Certification program is strongly supported by *qldwater* and project stakeholders, as are other recommendations from the “Final Report” including independence between the Certifying Body and Certification Framework Owner.

A matrix of unit processes and basic plant complexity details was provided to employers, who were required to gather evidence of qualifications held in order to identify gaps. WIOA then worked with each employer to help interpret requirements. Accessing required records, even in larger organisations, has proven challenging. The “currency” of qualifications held by some operators also creates challenges.

Of the 26 staff captured in this part of the process, all had at least one training gap, with an average overall of 5 additional units of competency required per employee in order to be certified.

2.5 Training Providers and Process

An Expression of Interest/ Invitation to deliver training services was sent to 7 Registered Training Organisations who had been consulted earlier in the development of the pilot work program. At the time of writing, responses were not due to be received and had not therefore been evaluated. The invitation included a basic specification.

The pilot is effectively complete when participants are enrolled in training and have been through preliminary evaluation by the training provider on required delivery modes (including recognition of prior learning). Full delivery of gap training may take some time, and enough evidence to support the business case will have been gathered by that stage.

2.6 Resources Required for Full Implementation

The business case, currently in draft will attempt to outline full costs and benefits of a

State-wide implementation of Certification. Early issues include:

- Generous training subsidies for full qualifications, but limited options for partial qualifications or individual units of competency. This is particularly relevant for small and remote service providers where a full Water Operations qualification may not be required.
- No clear funding options to provide support for service providers while staff are being trained.
- Any implementation will need to be staged to cope with these and other impediments identified during the pilot. Needs extend well beyond financial support – there is little point in a significant investment if organisations are not well equipped to manage training required under Certification on an ongoing basis, and support networks are inadequate for those trained.

3.0 CONCLUSION

It is important to focus on the positives already identified through this work.

Finding organisations to volunteer has proven to be relatively easy and the project has attracted a significant profile in a short timeframe. Registered Training Organisations have also been keen to participate. While there are many capacity issues to be addressed, the general willingness to be involved has created strong momentum and high confidence in a positive outcome.

While what might happen in a national context for the Draft Framework remains unclear, the leadership demonstrated by participating employers and their staff to develop and fund this work is strong evidence of the Queensland Urban Water Industry's commitment to meeting the needs of the communities it serves.

4.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

qldwater would like to acknowledge the efforts of participating organisations, WIOA, WIST and DEWS along with David Sheehan, formerly of the Victorian Department of Health for his ongoing advice and support for this work.

5.0 REFERENCES

Government Skills Australia/ National Water Commission, "Proposed National Certification Framework 2012."

Government Skills Australia/ National Water Commission, "National Certification Framework Final Report 2012."