

Voluntary national accreditation—a future pathway for the fire protection industry

A voluntary accreditation scheme is being developed by FPA Australia to ensure that testing and inspection of fire protection systems is delivered by appropriately qualified individuals.

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Today in Australia there is an appreciation, if not an expectation, for standardised licensing frameworks across industry. We make informed decisions every day based on the confidence that service providers we engage are both suitably qualified and hold the appropriate licenses. Often these licenses are referenced in legislation.

Many trades and occupations in the construction industry, for example, are licensed by government regulators or recognised through accreditation schemes from independent bodies or organisations. Trades such as plumbing, building and electrical work have long-established licence requirements aimed at ensuring minimum industry competencies, consistency of work practices and public confidence.

The fire protection industry involves many individual occupations because fire protection equipment and systems installed in buildings and other facilities are complex and varied. Although there are many specific individual fire protection industry occupations, they are linked by a common objective—installing and maintaining equipment and systems to protect life, property and the environment.

The importance of installing and maintaining fire protection systems to achieve health and safety goals is reflected in building regulations across Australia. However, despite the shared objectives of these regulations, not all states and territories have licensing requirements for fire protection industry occupations. In fact Queensland is the only state that has licensing requirements specifically targeted at fire protection.

Thus, the question becomes: given the dire safety

implications for work carried out incorrectly by poorly trained individuals, why is there no nationally recognised competency-based accreditation for fire protection work in Australia?

Current regulatory framework—an incomplete patchwork

With the exception of the requirements stipulated by the *Ozone Protection and Synthetic Greenhouse Gas Regulations 1995*, which cover some limited activities in the industry, in most states of Australia no strong framework exists to licence fire protection work. Queensland is a notable exception, where the Building Services Authority's (BSA's) Fire Occupational Licences have delivered a benchmark for the industry, and a level of peace of mind for end users.

The BSA fire occupational licensing scheme means that all practitioners carrying out or supervising fire protection work in Queensland require a licence. There are some exceptions for plumbers and electricians performing certain tasks.

The BSA framework was introduced after the report into the Childers Backpacker Fire of June 2000 recommended tighter regulation of the fire protection industry in Queensland.

This resulted in the creation of 12 licensing classes in total under the BSA framework, covering most fire protection occupations. No other state or territory currently administers a licensing framework that comprehensively targets the fire protection industry the way the BSA framework does, although some less-extensive requirements are in place in other states.



For example, the Plumbing Industry Commission in Victoria and the Tasmania Fire Service maintain some limited requirements.

However, this fragmented patchwork of regulation means it is difficult and complex for end users to determine if a fire protection contractor operating on their site has the appropriate skills and is competent. Moreover, technicians moving from state to state struggle to map their skills across to the different requirements under each jurisdiction.

This situation has not gone unnoticed by regulators. The independent Productivity Commission established by the Federal Government has identified that the overlapping and inconsistent approach of the states and territories to licensing requirements is resulting in reduced efficiency and productivity and labour mobility issues affecting the national economy.

Accordingly, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) signed an intergovernmental agreement on 30 April 2009 to establish a national occupational licensing system for a range of occupations: the National Occupational Licensing Authority (NOLA).

Some of the first occupations considered by NOLA in the property area include electrical, plumbing and gas fitting occupations. The second review will focus on building and building-related occupations. The intention is that individual state and territory licences will be transferred to a new national system that entitles licence holders to work anywhere in the country. The new licences will be granted based on a single set of nationally agreed eligibility requirements.

However, the current Regulatory Impact Statement released by NOLA relates to the electrical trades and makes extremely minor, if not insignificant, reference to activities associated with fire equipment and systems that have electrical components. There is currently no firm indication as to whether NOLA will eventually review specific fire-protection-based occupations in consideration for national licensing. At the time of writing this article NOLA had released the RIS for Plumbing and GasFitting, for which the Association is currently compiling its submission.

Although the BSA scheme has been established in Queensland and the activities of NOLA may address fire protection occupations in the future, the lack of dedicated licensing requirements in other states and territories continues.

It was with these considerations in mind that Fire Protection Association Australia (FPA Australia) identified the need to initiate work on the development of a suitable framework for accrediting individuals in the fire protection industry nationally through a voluntary accreditation scheme.

FPA Australia is the peak not-for-profit association for the fire protection industry. It is governed by a Board of Directors, with its national head office in Melbourne. The Association plays a pivotal role in providing advice and information on all aspects of fire safety and related emergencies through a range of services to the industry and the wider community.

The scheme will be voluntary and aims to attract industry participants who wish to be independently recognised and promoted as holding the minimum skills and business requirements to undertake certain activities in the marketplace.

The nationally harmonised scheme would have a dual benefit for end users. It would provide confidence by validating an individual through the checking of their recognition card, and also act as a strong marketing tool for accredited technicians and businesses.

Implementation and delivery

Following indicative approval from the Association's Board of Directors earlier this year, work has commenced on development of the scheme including:

- classes and categories
- minimum qualification, competency and training requirements
- application processes.

The working group identified the 'inspect and test' area of fire protection work as the most practical avenue to commence the accreditation scheme.

This is because there is already in place a well-established competency and training regime to support accreditation in this field. When implemented, the scheme would be designed to:

- provide confidence and assurance to building owners, building occupiers, facility managers, insurance companies, fire services and the community that individuals and business entities accredited under the scheme have met minimum 'benchmarks' to undertake the scope of work for which they are accredited, including minimum competencies, business requirements and insurance

- introduce a consistent approach to accreditation, initially focusing on the 'inspect and test' activities of the fire protection industry based on nationally endorsed qualifications
- subsequently provide businesses within the fire protection industry with a clear process by which they can be accredited as providers of quality work and offer improved levels of reliability, confidence and safety for people and property throughout Australia
- be adopted by and applied to individual states and territories while implemented within a national framework that recognises the qualifications and licences of fire protection
- integrate with existing accreditation for technicians covered by other schemes including the BSA Queensland or the Fire Protection Industry (ODS & SGG) Board licences.

Scott Williams, CEO, FPA Australia, said the Association was the right organisation to deliver the scheme for the industry.

"FPA Australia is in a prime position to develop, drive, implement and manage the scheme thanks to our close involvement with the development and maintenance of industry standards and our strong relationships with government and key stakeholders around Australia," he said.

"In addition, FPA Australia currently manages accreditation and licensing schemes both at a state and federal level."

"The fire protection industry has, in recent years, been in the spotlight as a result of devastating fire incidents such as the Quakers Hill Nursing Home Fire in NSW, Black Saturday Fires in Victoria, the Childers Backpacker Fire in Queensland and the recent tragic unit fire in Bankstown, Sydney, among others.

"These events have highlighted varying levels of competency among fire protection industry individuals as well as inadequate supervision, training shortfalls and the need for skills-based accreditation of the fire protection industry workforce.

"It is these kinds of community concerns we will address with the scheme, while also effectively marketing the scheme in order to make it an attractive prospect for individuals and companies to be part of."

FPA Australia expects to promote members of the scheme as 'providers of choice' to encourage an increase in the professionalism of the industry, recognise skills and foster confidence about the professionalism of the industry to other stakeholders relying on fire protection contractors.

The accreditation scheme is currently in a working draft format and the Board has agreed to support the scheme for future implementation.

The working draft document proposes that the first accreditations for 'inspect and test' could start in early 2013. This would begin with an initial voluntary accreditation for individuals and a subsequent accreditation of businesses.

Mr Williams said the recognition of experienced individuals was a vital component of the scheme.

"The accreditation scheme will have three specific pathways to recognise the skills of individuals. The first will recognise the skills of experienced individuals working within the industry. The second will recognise those individuals with relevant qualifications, while the third will recognise trainees who have entered the industry and wish to become qualified. Any individual will have 24 months to transition to a qualified status.

"The scheme will incorporate existing essential components of the Australian Government training agenda on competency-based training and assessment, and the accreditation levels will meet the requirements of individual state government regulators based on qualifications recognised by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)."

The accreditation scheme will be financed by a fee-based system on application and attainment of accreditation. Business accreditation will also attract a fee, however, this may be introduced over time.

The road ahead

The Association expects and is prepared for the hurdles that lie ahead with the introduction of the scheme. The process of introducing the scheme to FPA Australia members, the fire protection industry, legislators and the broader community will no doubt prove to be both challenging and complex.

A consultation group will be established in each state comprised of key stakeholders. This group will provide feedback to the working group on the implementation of the scheme. The stakeholder consultation group will likely be comprised of national peak bodies such as the Property Council of Australia, Insurance Council Australia, Facility Management Association, Fire Protection Industry (ODS & SGG) Board and state regulatory bodies.

Further, FPA Australia, with the help of the stakeholder group, intends to demonstrate to state and territory regulators and NOLA that this scheme provides appropriate requirements for future national adoption.

FPA Australia expects to offer the scheme to occupations associated with 'inspect and test' of fire protection equipment and systems in early 2013. At a later date, the scheme will be expanded to include design, installation and commission, and certify and maintain activities. ■

More information on the voluntary fire protection accreditation scheme is expected to be released shortly. This will be announced through FPA Australia, including on the Association's website at www.fpa.com.au.