

## **Section 4 National Competency Standards for Entry-Level Dietitians in Australia**

### **4.1 Competence and competency based standards**

Competence may be broadly defined as the possession and development of sufficient skills, appropriate attitudes and experience for successful performance in life roles. Professional competency standards are statements describing the ability to perform the activities required by a profession or occupation to the level expected in the workplace. Competency standards are comprised of attributes, which include; knowledge, skills and attitudes. The attributes required for professional practice is described to reflect the unique roles and contexts within which the particular profession operates (Gonczi et al, 1990).

Competency-based assessment is an approach to establishing occupationally-relevant standards of competence. The emphasis is on *demonstrated competence* in the attributes important to an occupation or profession, rather than measuring knowledge in isolation from skills, or on measuring the time that has been spent in formal professional or academic education (Masters and McCurry, 1990).

The linking of competence to employment was an initiative of the Commonwealth government in the late 1980's resulting in the development of the Australian Standards Framework. In the vocational sector, the introduction of competency-based training aimed to match training outcomes via a flexible and efficient workforce, whereas in the professions, competencies were linked only to the recognition of prior learning of non-Australian trained professionals. Generally most professions have now embraced competency standards and assessment into tertiary education (Phillips et al, 2000a).

The format of the competency standards contains up to five components as defined below:

#### **1. Units of Competency**

Units of competency are concisely worded statements describing key areas of competency expressed in outcome terms. They are descriptors of the major work roles of a profession. See Appendix 1.1.

#### **2. Elements of Competency**

Elements of competency outline what an individual must do to fulfil these work roles. See Appendix 1.1

#### **3. Performance Criteria**

Performance criteria are evaluative statements describing the level of performance expected for each element of competency. These aid assessors to determine whether the required level of performance has been reached. See Appendix 1.1.

#### **4. Range of Variables**

Range of variables outline the contexts in which performance must occur. These establish boundaries and constraints to be considered during the assessment of performance. See Appendix 1.2

#### **5. Evidence guides**

Evidence guides provide further information for assessment including the contexts in which assessment should take place, which units or elements should be assessed concurrently and what constitutes sufficient evidence of competency. See Appendix 1.2 (Ash and Phillips, 2000).

## **4.2 The development and review of national competency standards for entry level dietitians in Australia.**

The Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA), published the *National Competency Standards for Entry-level Dietitians* in 1993, after a five-year research project. This project was funded by the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR), Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training, to ensure the examination process for dietitians not educated in Australia was competency based. DAA set up a research task force, which involved representatives from universities, existing registration boards, the Dietetics Panel of NOOSR and DAA. The members of the task force varied over the period of the research project but included Susan Ash (Project Officer), Sandra Capra (President of DAA 1997–2001, 2003 – 2005), Fiona Cumming, Lynne Daniels, Kaye Gibbons (President of DAA 1988-1990), Margaret Miller (President of DAA 1987-1988), Cheryl Rae (President of DAA 1992-1995), Noel Roberts, Linda Tapsell, Nita Whipp (President of DAA, 1990-1992).

The Competency Standards were developed using a combined methodology (functional analysis and critical incident interviews). Functional analysis enables a description of Competency Standards in terms of functions with the broad professional context. These functions are expanded to include roles and attributes. The research task force of experienced dietitians used functional analysis to develop a draft Competency Standards. Twenty-five (25) critical incident interviews with new graduates were conducted to validate this draft. The methodology was unique among professional bodies and has been described in Ash, Gonczi and Hager (1992). Consultation also occurred with dietitians through workshops in all State branches and comment was sought from all universities educating dietitians in 1993.

The Competency Standards for Entry-level Dietitians were reviewed in 1998, due to the expansion of entry-level practice into new areas, such as public health nutrition, industry, private practice and sports nutrition (Phillips et al, 2000).

In this review of the standards, a similar number of new graduates (24) were interviewed, to identify the activities performed by entry level practitioners in a variety of work environments and to identify underlying attributes required to perform these activities competently. A methodology using the social science principles of ethnography and ethnomethodology was adopted. This was in contrast to the critical incident interviews used in the validation of the original Competency Standards (Ash, Gonczi, Hager, 1992). The results of this review showed that core activities, such as seeing patients and coordinating individual care remained important, however new areas of practice had emerged, such as managing a private practice, managing a nutrition service and performing quality activities. Additional skills and knowledge required to perform these activities have been incorporated into the Competency Standards, based on this review (Phillips et al, 2000a).

The National Competency Standards were reviewed in 2005 to reflect changes in dietetic practice. A major revision of the Standards took place in 2008, with funding support from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. The current edition (2009) encompasses mental health competencies and current dietetic practice issues.

### **4.3 Use of national competency standards for entry-level dietitians**

The Competency Standards have been used in the following ways:

- By DAA, as the basis of the accreditation processes for university programs,
- By DAA, as the basis for assessing dietitians not educated in Australia and wishing to practice in Australia,
- By DAA, as a means of communicating with other professions and occupations with a nutrition and food work environment,
- By universities, to assess students on their practical placements,
- By other dietitians, to determine the need for continuing professional development,
- As a public information document outlining the roles and responsibilities of the dietitian (Phillips et al, 2000b),
- As a basis for the development of Advanced Practitioner and Fellow Competencies (DAA, 2005).

## 4.4 How to apply the national competency standards

<b>Foundation Competencies</b>	<b>Unit 1</b> <b>Underlying Knowledge</b> Demonstrates knowledge sufficient to ensure safe practice		
	<b>Unit 7</b> <b>Research and Evaluation</b> Integrates research and evaluation principles into practice	<b>Unit 8</b> <b>Management and Organisation</b> Applies management principles in the provision of nutrition services, programs and products	<b>Unit 9</b> <b>Professionalism, advocacy, innovation and leadership</b> Demonstrates a professional, ethical and entrepreneurial approach, advocating for excellence in nutrition and dietetics
<b>Core Competencies</b>	<b>Unit 2</b> <b>Nutrition Communication</b> Demonstrates effective and appropriate skills in listening and communicating information, advice, education and professional opinion to individuals, groups and communities		<b>Unit 3</b> <b>Collection, analysis and assessment of nutrition/health data</b> Collects, organises and assesses data relating to the health and nutritional status of individuals, groups and populations
<b>Critical Practice</b>	<b>Unit 4</b> <b>Individual Case Management</b> Manages client-centred nutrition care for individuals	<b>Unit 5</b> <b>Community and Public Health Nutrition and Advocacy for Food Supply</b> Plans, implements and evaluates nutrition programs with communities or populations as part of a team	<b>Unit 6</b> <b>Food Service Management</b> Manages components of a food service to provide safe and nutritious food

**Figure 1**

The standards are comprised of 9 units of competency, with clinical case management, community nutrition and food service delivery being the three dominant areas of entry level practice.

Units 4, 5 and 6 are the critical practice areas of individual case management in clinical nutrition, community and influencing the food supply.

Units 1, 7, 8 and 9 are foundation competencies, outlining critical knowledge base, scientific approach and professional attitude respectively, which may be common to many professions.

Units 2 and 3 are unique to dietitians, relating mostly to "dietetic skills".

To be assessed as competent new graduates must meet all 9 units of competency.

Core activities which entry level dietitians usually perform and the knowledge skills and attitudes which underpin these are shown in Appendix 1.3. Assessment of these activities will ensure that all units of competency are captured.