

Section 1 DAA Philosophy on Dietetic Education

The key purpose of the profession of nutrition and dietetics is embodied in the following statement:

“The profession of dietetics contributes to the promotion of health and the treatment of illness by optimising the nutrition of communities and individuals. It utilises scientific principles and methods in the study of nutrition and applies these results to influence the wider environment affecting food intake and eating behaviour”.

(National Competency Standards for Entry-level Dietitians, DAA, 1993)

This is consistent with the international definition of dietetics set in 2004 by the International Confederation of Dietetic Associations, of which the Dietitians Association of Australia is a member.

“A dietitian is a person with a qualification in nutrition and dietetics recognised by national authority [s]. The dietitian applies the science of nutrition to the feeding and education of groups of people and individuals in health and disease. The scope of dietetic practice is such that dietitians may work in a variety of settings and have a variety of work functions”

(Accepted by 34 dietetic association members of the ICDA on May 29th 2004, Chicago)

DAA recognises that the differentiation between nutrition and dietetics is not universal. In Australia all dietitians are nutritionists, as all dietitians must have studied nutrition and nutrition science, but not all nutritionists are dietitians, as they may not have completed essential components of study.

1.1 Recognition of nutrition and dietetics in Australia – the development process

The Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) is committed to a high standard of professional expertise in its members, leading to the highest quality of health care within the wider community. This is the basis for the Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) program, and the recognition of advanced practitioners. Dietetics is a self-regulated profession and DAA believes this is best served by a quality improvement and professional development framework.

Consistent with this approach, DAA is committed to a high standard of education for entry-level dietitians. DAA has ensured that structures and processes for education, accreditation and professional development are quality focussed, independent and transparent. Since 1988, DAA has formalised these processes with the development of appropriate committee structures. The initial Training and Accreditation Committee (TAC) developed guidelines for the maintenance of student education standards and a process for accrediting existing and potential programs. In October 1992 this Committee was renamed the Education and Accreditation Committee (EAC), later renamed the Dietetic Standards and Accreditation Advisory Committee (DSAAC) in 1998. This final iteration occurred to ensure comparability in entry level practitioners and to ensure safety within the Australian community as the committee now also oversees the examination for overseas educated dietitians). In keeping with the philosophy of quality, DAA established a Council of Dietetic Standards and Recognition in 1999. This Council includes members of the public with expertise in professions and professional development, elected members of DSAAC, members who have overseas qualifications and other members as required. It operates under a Charter (which can be viewed at the DAA website) and is the final arbiter on accreditation issues. The Council has a communication line to the Board of the DAA but operates independently to ensure that impartiality is maintained.

In 2001, DAA introduced Associate Membership to recognise persons with nutrition qualifications without dietetic qualifications. The process of recognition is that persons with the level and depth of nutrition education consistent with an entry level dietitian are recognised, as are persons with post graduate research qualifications in nutrition sciences and persons from closely related fields who have made a contribution to the nutrition community in Australia. DAA sees this as a natural extension of its credentialing programs in an environment where nutrition programs have proliferated. This is consistent with the quality assurance and public safety framework under which DAA is operating.

1.2 DAA philosophy of continual quality improvement

Entry to the profession of dietetics as a novice represents only one step in the continuing development of members. The Accredited Practising Dietitian credential depends on commitment to continued professional development to predetermined learning goals. The Advanced Accredited Practising Dietitian (AdvAPD) recognises advanced levels of skills and builds on these learning goals. Novices enter the provisional APD program under a mentor to consolidate and further develop skills.

Diversity in dietetic practice is now a given in the dietetic profession. Data from DAA membership statistics confirms the trend for dietitians to be engaged in many aspects of the food and nutrition industry. A minority are now engaged in the hospital sector, although this remains the single largest employment sector. In recognition of this, DAA is actively seeking novices who are prepared in ways that capitalise on the variety of opportunities that now exist in the Australian food and nutrition industry.

Dietetic education in Australia is generalist, its combination of skills are such that it prepares novices for careers in a variety of settings. Some dietitians will be attracted to careers which require other skills in combination with those traditionally taught. These careers may place less demand on aspects of dietetics currently given prominence in 'generalist' education, for example food service management careers, which require more management and fewer clinical and public health dietetic skills.

In terms of preparing novices, DAA supports diversity in teaching approaches and differences in emphases within dietetic education programs, while maintaining an essential common core of elements. DAA feels that such an approach best suits the dynamic health environment and permits choice for potential students. DAA expects schools will evaluate their approaches and recognise their responsibilities to produce graduate dietitians competent for independent practice and responsive to the evolving health and nutrition needs of the community. DAA seeks to engage in active dialogue with Universities to ensure that core competencies are maintained and expects to be an active partner in program development and evaluation. DAA sees the core competencies as the minimum to practice and believes universities should seek to exceed these where possible.

It is important that education and professional development programs will ensure that the profession will flourish as its members successfully compete for a wide range of positions related to their main purpose. It is essential that the profession develops as a spectrum of professionals with a common core of educational content and a broad common vocational purpose.

Consistent with changes in the environment and the philosophy of quality improvement DAA

- remains committed to generalist education for entry to the profession, including some preparation in medical nutrition therapy, population health focussing on community nutrition and food and nutrition service management
- continues to support and encourage diversity within basic generalist education, with programs developing areas of emphasis
- ensures that demands for increasing levels of sophistication in particular interest areas do not distort the concept of generalist entry-level education;

- recognises and helps to develop the range of postgraduate education which complements core dietetic skills; and
- encourages members to compete for a wide range of positions to which they can contribute, and continue to embrace and support those members within the professional organisation.

1.3 DAA role in education programs

- DAA has defined competency-based standards for entry-level dietitians as prerequisites for membership, and accredits programs which provide a broad and sound foundation in nutrition and dietetics (see Section 3).
- DAA reviews the competencies on an on-going basis to ensure continued relevance to the profession and community.
- DAA provides on-going commitment to accreditation and to working with universities to ensure continued quality improvement in the preparative programs.
- DAA supports universities offering nutrition programs to ensure that programs provide eligibility for associate membership.
- DAA nominates appropriate members to serve on university committees that advise on program development and progress.
- DAA supports universities in developing their strengths to complement the graduate's achievement of minimum entry level competencies for dietetics.
- DAA communicates with universities to keep them abreast of any developments.
- DAA provides appropriate feedback to universities where the accreditation requirements are not met or are at risk and withdraws accreditation if agreement for change cannot be reached.