Australian Institute of Architects

NATIONAL STANDARDS OF COMPETENCY FOR ARCHITECTS 2026

Input to inform Terms of Reference for the next review of the National Standard of Competency for Architects – Board of Architects Queensland

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Institute) is the peak body for the architectural profession in Australia. It is an independent, national member organisation with more than 13,500 members across Australia and overseas.

The Institute exists to advance the interests of members, support professional standards and contemporary practice, and advocate the value of architects and architecture to the sustainable growth of our communities, economy and culture.

The Institute actively works to maintain and improve the quality of our built environment by promoting better, responsible and environmental design.

+ At the time of this submission the National President is Adam Haddow FRAIA.
+ At the time of this submission the Queensland President is Peter Gardiner FRAIA.
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The Royal Australian Institute of Architects recognises the unceded sovereign lands and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of these lands and waters.

This recognition generates acknowledgement and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Countries, Cultures and Communities, and their ways of being, knowing and doing.

Caring for Country practices including architecture and place shaping have existed on this continent since time immemorial.

The Institute recognises a professional commitment to engage and act meaningfully through reciprocal partnership and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Together we will support and develop the emergence of new possibilities for our shared future.

INPUT TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE NATIONAL STANDARD OF COMPETENCY FOR ARCHITECTS

1. Introduction

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects welcomes the opportunity to provide input to inform the Terms of Reference for the next review of the National Standard of Competency for Architects.

The NSCA is a foundational document for the architectural profession in Australia. It supports accreditation of architecture programs, informs practical experience expectations, underpins the Architectural Practice Examination, assists registration decisions, and provides a benchmark for professional competence. It also has broader value in communicating to government, industry, clients and the public the scope, value and responsibilities of architects.

The Institute's 2021 submission to AACA recognised that the last review represented a significant and broadly positive shift in the competency framework. In particular, the Institute supported the simplification of the framework, the reduction in the total number of competencies, and the move away from a strictly linear project delivery model. The 2021 submission also strongly supported the inclusion of social, ethical, cultural and environmental responsibilities, including First Nations perspectives, climate action and care for Country.

Given the significance of those changes, the next review should not begin from an assumption that further substantial restructure is required. Rather, it should first evaluate how the 2021 NSCA has operated in practice, including its use by registration boards, APE candidates, examiners, accreditation panels, architecture schools, employers, supervisors and practitioners.

The Institute recommends that the Terms of Reference focus on:

- clarifying and refining the NSCA;
- improving usability, assess-ability and consistency of interpretation;
- strengthening alignment between competencies, practical experience, the APE and registration decisions;
- testing whether the 2021 changes have achieved their intended purpose;
- ensuring the standard remains relevant to contemporary and future architectural practice;
- maintaining the public protection purpose of registration;
- supporting national consistency while recognising jurisdictional legislative differences.

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2. Scope of the review

The Institute recommends that the review primarily focus on clarification, refinement, implementation and assessment alignment, rather than wholesale structural reform.

The 2021 review introduced significant changes to the NSCA. The Institute's previous submission welcomed the reduction in competencies from 70 to 60 and the reduction in graduate requirements from 37 to 35, noting that this would improve ease of use for academics, assessors and registration candidates. It also supported the removal of the previous nine elements because this allowed the competencies to be more flexible, less repetitive and better aligned with diverse practice experiences.

That direction should be maintained. A further substantial restructure risks creating uncertainty for candidates, educators, examiners, registration boards and practitioners. It may also make it more difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the 2021 changes.

However, the Terms of Reference should allow targeted structural adjustment where evidence demonstrates that the current domains, professional capabilities or performance criteria are unclear, duplicative, difficult to assess, or no longer representative of practice.

The NSCA should continue to define the competency required for general practice and registration as an architect. It should not become a specialist accreditation framework for every emerging role. However, it should better recognise that general architectural practice now occurs across a broader range of practice models and employment settings, including:

- traditional architectural practice;
- multidisciplinary design firms;
- government and client-side roles;
- design management;
- design review and advisory roles;
- sustainability, heritage and cultural advisory roles;
- urban design and strategic design roles;
- digital delivery and BIM coordination;
- construction-phase advisory and quality assurance roles.

The future practice horizon should anticipate:

- climate adaptation, resilience and decarbonisation;
- housing supply, affordability, density, diversity and liveability challenges;
- changing procurement models and fragmented project delivery;
- digital practice, BIM, data-rich documentation and AI-supported workflows;
- increasing expectations around designing with Country and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge;
- greater public scrutiny of building quality, professional accountability and consumer protection;
- multidisciplinary delivery environments where the architect's role may be central but not always linear or traditionally procured.

3. Practice and industry relevance

The Terms of Reference should require the review to test whether the current NSCA reflects the realities of contemporary practice.

Since the 2021 review, architectural practice has continued to evolve. Key changes include:

- increased use of digital tools, BIM and model-based coordination;
- emerging use of artificial intelligence in design, documentation, research and practice management;
- greater attention to embodied carbon, operational performance, circular economy principles and climate resilience;
- increasing complexity of planning, building, accessibility, safety in design, heritage and environmental regulation;
- more fragmented procurement models;
- increased contractual risk transfer to consultants;
- reduced or excluded architectural involvement in construction-phase services;
- continuing concerns around fee adequacy, documentation quality and project risk;
- heightened expectations for cultural competency, inclusion, accessibility and engagement with Country;
- stronger public and government focus on housing supply, design quality, resilience and long-term value.

The Institute's 2021 submission noted that the NSCA's move away from a traditional linear project delivery model better reflected current procurement practice, while still allowing traditional delivery models to fit within the framework. The next review should test whether that flexibility has worked in practice, particularly in relation to assessment and registration.

Capability areas that should be considered in the review include:

Procurement and project delivery

The NSCA should more clearly recognise the relationship between procurement, contractual risk, design quality, documentation quality, construction-phase involvement and consumer protection. Architects increasingly work in fragmented delivery environments where concept design, documentation and construction-phase services may be separated, novated, reduced or excluded.

The standard should ensure that candidates understand:

- traditional, contemporary and emerging procurement models;
- the risk implications of different contract types;
- the impact of procurement decisions on design quality and documentation;
- the importance of continuity of design intent;
- the architect's role in contract administration and construction-phase services;
- ethical and professional obligations where architects are novated, limited in scope or excluded from later project phases.

Climate, sustainability and resilience

The 2021 submission strongly argued that climate action, sustainability, embodied carbon, circular economy principles and resilience should be embedded in the NSCA. It stated that the profession should lead rather than wait for codes and government policy to drive change.

The next review should assess whether those expectations are now sufficiently clear, practical and assessable. In particular, the review should consider whether the NSCA adequately addresses:

- operational and embodied carbon;
- lifecycle thinking;
- adaptive reuse;
- circular economy principles;
- climate resilience;
- heat, flood, fire and extreme weather risks;
- material selection and supply chain impacts;
- designing for long-term performance and durability.

First Nations engagement, Country and cultural competency

The 2021 submission recognised the importance of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, care for Country and cultural literacy into architectural education and professional practice.

The next review should consider whether these expectations are expressed clearly enough to support meaningful education, practice and assessment. It should avoid reducing cultural competency to a compliance exercise. The Terms of Reference should require engagement with First Nations architects, designers, cultural advisors and relevant organisations to ensure the NSCA is respectful, practical and appropriately framed.

Digital practice and emerging technology

The 2021 submission adopted a careful position on BIM. It recognised the increasing use of BIM but cautioned against making the NSCA overly software-specific or assuming that BIM is universal across all forms and scales of practice. It suggested that flexible language such as “current digital modelling tools” may be more appropriate.

This remains a sound principle. The next review should consider digital competency, BIM, model-based coordination, data management and AI-supported workflows, but it should remain technology-neutral. The NSCA should focus on professional judgement, coordination, accuracy, authorship, responsibility and risk, rather than mandating specific software or tools.

Business, employment and practice management

The NSCA should more clearly recognise that professional competency includes understanding the business and employment context in which architectural services are delivered. This includes:

- sustainable fee structures;
- professional indemnity and risk management;
- employment obligations;
- supervision and mentoring;
- workplace culture;
- ethical business practices;
- resource planning;
- realistic programming;
- quality management;
- continuing professional development.

The 2021 submission identified work conditions, graduate experience and mentorship as areas of ongoing concern. It noted that the NSCA should provide a framework that supports appropriate work conditions and opportunities for students and graduates. These issues remain relevant.

4. Registration and assessment alignment

The Terms of Reference should place strong emphasis on alignment between the NSCA, practical experience requirements, the Architectural Practice Examination and registration decisions.

The NSCA must be clear enough to support consistent assessment. Candidates, supervisors, employers and examiners should be able to understand what evidence is required to demonstrate competency.

The 2021 submission raised concerns that some performance criteria combined multiple areas of knowledge and skill within a single criterion, making them unevenly weighted and more difficult for candidates to evidence. It specifically noted that where performance criteria address multiple areas, applicants may find it difficult to accurately and thoroughly document their experience.

The next review should therefore examine:

- whether each performance criterion is clear, discrete and assessable;
- whether some criteria contain too many concepts;
- whether criteria are appropriately weighted;
- whether there is duplication between criteria;
- whether the language is sufficiently plain and unambiguous;
- whether candidates and supervisors understand the evidence required;
- whether examiners are applying the criteria consistently;
- whether the criteria remain fit for use in logbooks, statements of practical experience and oral examinations.

The review should also examine whether clearer links are needed between:

- competency domains;
- professional capabilities;
- performance criteria;
- practical experience categories;
- acceptable forms of evidence;
- APE interview expectations;
- post-registration continuing professional development.

The Institute supports the continued use of staged competency profiles, including graduate, candidate for registration and registered architect stages. The 2021 submission welcomed these profiles because they help clarify the different responsibilities of universities, employers, graduates and the profession.

However, the review should assess whether these stages are now sufficiently clear and consistently understood.

Competencies that may require clearer assessment guidance include:

- ethical judgement;
- cultural competency;
- environmental responsibility;
- procurement and contractual risk;
- construction-phase judgement;
- practice management;
- professional communication;
- public interest obligations;
- digital coordination and information management.

The Terms of Reference should require the review to test proposed changes against real assessment scenarios, including sample logbook entries, statements of experience, case studies and APE interview questions.

5. National consistency and legislative alignment

The NSCA must support national consistency while recognising that each state and territory has its own Architects Act, regulations, code of conduct, board procedures and disciplinary framework.

The Terms of Reference should require consideration of jurisdictional legislative issues, including:

- how the NSCA supports registration decisions under each Architects Act;
- how state and territory boards use the NSCA in practice;
- whether the NSCA is sufficiently clear to support disciplinary and conduct-related decisions;
- how overseas experience and alternative pathways are interpreted;
- how candidates in non-traditional roles are assessed;
- how construction-phase experience is treated where procurement models limit opportunities;

- how professional conduct obligations align with competency expectations.

The review should also examine where inconsistent interpretation has created operational challenges. These may include:

- what constitutes sufficient practical experience;
- what level of construction-phase experience is required;
- how to assess experience gained in government, client-side, academic, design management or multidisciplinary roles;
- how to assess experience across different project scales and procurement models;
- how to recognise experience gained in regional or remote practice;
- how to interpret cultural, environmental and ethical competencies.

The level of prescriptiveness should be carefully balanced. The NSCA should be sufficiently clear to support national consistency, but not so prescriptive that it prevents registration boards from applying their own legislation or professional judgement.

A preferred model would be:

- a clear national standard;
- explanatory notes;
- evidence guidance;
- assessment examples;
- examiner calibration materials;
- jurisdictional implementation guidance where needed.

6. Stakeholder engagement

The review should include broad and structured stakeholder engagement.

The NSCA is used by, and affects, a wide range of stakeholders. The Terms of Reference should identify who will be consulted, why they will be consulted, and at what stage of the review their input will be sought.

Key stakeholders should include:

- state and territory Architects Registration Boards;
- AACA;
- Australian Institute of Architects;
- Association of Consulting Architects;
- Association of Architecture Schools of Australasia;
- architecture schools;
- accreditation panels;
- registered architects in small, medium and large practice;
- sole practitioners;
- regional and remote practitioners;
- emerging architects and graduates;
- candidates preparing for registration;
- supervisors and mentors;
- First Nations architects, designers, cultural advisors and organisations;

- culturally diverse practitioners;
- architects working in government, client-side, institutional and multidisciplinary roles;
- professional indemnity insurers and risk advisors;
- client representatives from government, institutional and private sectors;
- construction, planning, engineering and project management representatives;
- public interest and consumer representatives where appropriate.

The review should specifically seek input from groups that are often under-represented in national competency development, including:

- early-career practitioners;
- graduates and registration candidates;
- regional and remote practitioners;
- First Nations practitioners;
- culturally diverse practitioners;
- sole practitioners and small practice;
- architects working outside traditional architectural practice;
- sessional academics and practice-based educators;
- practitioners with experience in housing, community infrastructure and public projects.

Architects Registration Boards should be involved throughout the review, not only at the final consultation stage. Their involvement should include:

- defining the regulatory issues to be addressed;
- identifying interpretation and implementation challenges;
- testing draft performance criteria;
- reviewing legal and operational implications;
- advising on transition arrangements;
- supporting examiner and assessor calibration.

7. Implementation and transition

The Terms of Reference should require a clear implementation and transition plan.

Substantial changes to the NSCA can have significant consequences for:

- candidates already preparing for the APE;
- graduates recording practical experience;
- supervisors and mentors;
- employers;
- architecture schools;
- accreditation panels;
- examiners;
- registration boards;
- continuing professional development providers.

The Institute's 2021 submission noted that changes to accreditation processes and university learning outcomes may require significant lead time, including at least two years where curriculum and assessment changes are required.

The next review should therefore distinguish between:

- minor clarifications that can be implemented relatively quickly;
- moderate changes requiring guidance and examiner training;
- substantial changes requiring staged implementation across education, practical experience, examination and registration systems.

The implementation plan should address:

- transition arrangements for existing candidates;
- treatment of logbook experience already recorded;
- timing for the APE;
- updates to candidate guides;
- updates to supervisor and mentor guidance;
- examiner training and calibration;
- communication with universities;
- alignment with accreditation cycles;
- registration board implementation processes;
- post-implementation review.

If changes are modest, a 12-month transition may be appropriate. If changes are substantial, an 18–24 month staged transition may be required.

8. Evidence base and methodology

The review should be evidence-led, transparent and methodologically robust.

The Terms of Reference should require AACA to document:

- the review methodology;
- the evidence sources considered;
- the consultation process;
- how feedback is analysed;
- how decisions are made;
- the rationale for proposed changes;
- how legal, regulatory, educational and practice implications are assessed.

The review should draw on evidence including:

- registration trends;
- APE candidate performance;
- examiner and assessor feedback;
- accreditation findings;
- feedback from architecture schools;
- complaints and disciplinary data from registration boards;
- candidate, supervisor and employer feedback;
- workforce research;
- graduate employment and progression data;
- professional indemnity and claims trends;
- procurement and contracting trends;
- climate, housing and built environment policy developments;
- international benchmarking.

The Terms of Reference should expressly require an evaluation of the implementation and operation of the 2021 NSCA. This should test whether the current standard is:

- clear;
- usable;
- assessable;
- consistently interpreted;
- aligned with practical experience;
- aligned with registration decision-making;
- relevant to contemporary practice;
- sufficiently stable for accreditation and education purposes.

International benchmarking should include comparable jurisdictions and those relevant to current or potential mutual recognition arrangements, including New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States.

Benchmarking should not be used to simply import overseas models. Rather, it should help test whether Australia's competency standard remains internationally credible, appropriately rigorous and fit for local legislative, educational and practice conditions.

9. Evidence base and methodology

Although not listed as a separate consultation heading, the Institute recommends that the Terms of Reference expressly recognise the public purpose of the NSCA.

The 2021 submission acknowledged that the primary purpose of the NSCA is consumer protection. It also noted that the NSCA has wider professional and community benefits, including its potential to communicate to the public what architects do.

This remains important.

The NSCA should support public confidence in architects by clearly articulating the competencies, judgement, ethical obligations and professional responsibilities expected of a registered architect.

It should also help explain the distinct value of architects in:

- protecting the public interest;
- improving design quality;
- supporting safe, durable and sustainable buildings;
- coordinating complex design and regulatory requirements;
- advising clients independently and ethically;
- contributing to climate resilience and decarbonisation;
- supporting cultural, social and community outcomes;
- helping deliver long-term value in the built environment.

The NSCA should not reduce the role of the architect to technical compliance or documentation production. Nor should it become so broad or aspirational that it is difficult to assess. The review should maintain a careful balance between regulatory clarity, professional formation and public value.

10. Success criteria

The Terms of Reference should include clear success criteria.

The review should be considered successful if the revised NSCA:

- is clear, accessible and usable;
- supports consistent national registration decisions;
- assists state and territory registration boards;
- is legally and operationally useful;
- aligns with practical experience, the APE and accreditation;
- reflects contemporary and future architectural practice;
- maintains the public protection purpose of registration;
- recognises climate, cultural, ethical and public interest responsibilities;
- provides clearer guidance for candidates, supervisors, educators and examiners;
- reduces ambiguity and unnecessary duplication;
- is flexible enough to apply across practice types, project scales and jurisdictions;
- can be implemented without unreasonable disruption.

Measurable indicators could include:

- improved candidate understanding of requirements;
- improved supervisor and mentor confidence;
- improved examiner consistency;
- fewer areas of disputed interpretation;
- positive feedback from registration boards;
- clearer mapping between competencies and APE evidence;
- clearer integration into accreditation processes;
- reduced need for supplementary interpretation;
- successful implementation within agreed timeframes;
- post-implementation review confirming the standard is operating as intended.

11. Other feedback

The Institute also recommends that the Terms of Reference make clear that the next review should not seek change for its own sake. The 2021 review was significant. The next phase should be an evidence-based review of how those changes have worked in practice, with targeted refinement where needed.

In particular, the review should test whether the 2021 NSCA has delivered:

- greater clarity;
- better usability;
- improved assessment consistency;
- stronger alignment with registration;
- meaningful integration of climate, Country, culture and ethics;
- sufficient recognition of changing procurement and practice models;
- clearer guidance for graduates, employers and supervisors.

The Terms of Reference should also require careful attention to plain English, definitions and explanatory guidance. The 2021 submission raised concerns about ambiguity, subjective language and performance criteria that combined multiple competencies within one criterion. These concerns remain relevant and should be addressed as part of the review.

12. Conclusion

The Institute supports a review of the NSCA that is evidence-based, targeted and focused on regulatory usefulness, professional relevance and national consistency.

The 2021 NSCA represented a substantial and broadly positive evolution in the competency framework for architects. It better recognised diverse practice models and strengthened the profession's social, ethical, cultural and environmental responsibilities. The next review should build on that work, not unnecessarily reopen settled structural questions without evidence.

The Institute recommends that the Terms of Reference require the review to:

- evaluate the operation of the 2021 NSCA;
- clarify and refine areas of ambiguity;
- strengthen alignment with practical experience, the APE and registration decisions;
- support national consistency while respecting jurisdictional legislation;
- ensure the NSCA remains relevant to contemporary and future practice;
- improve guidance for candidates, supervisors, educators, examiners and registration boards;
- maintain the public protection purpose of architectural registration.

The NSCA should remain a clear, credible and defensible benchmark for architectural competency in Australia. It should support registration, uphold public confidence, and articulate the professional capabilities required of architects working in the public interest.

Yours Sincerely,





Peter Gardiner
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