

WATER INDUSTRY OPERATOR CERTIFICATION REGISTRATION/ REGISTERED PROFESSIONAL OPERATOR FAQs

The Water Industry Operator Registration Framework 2021: Drinking Water, Wastewater, Recycled Water is published by **qldwater**, acting as secretariat for the Water Industry Operator Registration Taskforce (WIORT). The Taskforce is a group of senior industry volunteers who are committed to a strong professional development structure for Operators, which benefits the communities that they serve.

Q. What does Operator Registration aim to do?

A. The drivers are a little different between drinking water, wastewater and recycled water, but essentially, the reasons for having a Framework that supports Registered Professional Operators are:

- It helps ensure that both public health and the environment are protected, and that the drinking water, wastewater and recycled water that is provided to end users is safe and fit for purpose.
- It provides an assurance to regulators, communities and the users of drinking water and recycled water that Operators are competent to manage drinking water, wastewater and/or recycled water, as well as being capable of identifying and responding to drinking water, wastewater and/or recycled water quality risks and incidents.

There are a number of other potential benefits and risks that registration aims to address, including:

- improved quality of training in a thin training market. Registration is linked to the National Water Training Package (NWP) – it puts structure around what operators are trained in to make sure it's suitable and provides a process for them to remain up-to-date with emerging issues and technology.
- better portability and career options for operators – national collaboration makes it easier to get jobs elsewhere within the industry.
- an internal learning structure to support organisations with workforce planning, and Learning and Development (L&D) plans.
- better management of organisational risk – i.e. improved confidence and support for employers, regulators and staff.

Q. What does the Water Industry Operator Registration Framework cover?

A. In simple terms, the Framework is a process document which sets out the rules for the Registering Body (currently WIOA) to observe when running the registration program. There is a lot of detail that sits behind registration assessments and WIOA has developed a custom-built system called Acuario for tracking the whole process.

Registration is conducted by the Registering Body and attracts a fee to help support the maintenance of the system and other Framework-associated costs.

The advantages of going through Registration include that your organisation is commissioning an independent assessment of Operators to ensure that the formal training competencies they hold are appropriate for the systems they operate, and that organisations are committed to a consistent way of managing ongoing professional development for those Registered Operators.

Although many of the same benefits can be achieved by just following the principles of the Framework, the WIORT continues to promote the concept of mandatory Registration as voluntary systems are vulnerable to changes in people and employer policies over time.



Q. Why the name change from Certification to Registration?

A. The change is driven by the desire to remove potential confusion over the terms “Certificate” and “Certification”.

A Certificate is a qualification issued under the national Vocational Education and Training (VET) system. In our industry the qualification is predominantly a Certificate II, III, IV or Diploma in Water Industry Operations.

Certification (and from now on Registration) applies to an operator who has completed all the units of competency from the NWP that relate to the specific processes they operate and has committed to undertaking a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) process.

Changing the name of anyone who has completed this process to a Registered Professional Operator will create a clear distinction between them and a Qualified Operator. There are no other substantial changes to the Framework version released in 2018.

Q. What’s all this about minimum mandatory competencies?

A. Some sort of mandatory standard (for drinking water operators) has been an objective for over a decade. It hasn’t been formally regulated in any state or territory to date. The idea recognises that drinking water is managed by a range of different organisations with different skills and resources – and having some level of compulsory qualification (or, more accurately, partial qualification) helps provide the assurances communities should expect around the safety of the water they drink.



Victoria has had a scheme for Operators longer than any other Australian jurisdiction. It is not strictly mandated. Both Queensland and New South Wales have commenced investigating options, with consultation underway in 2021.

From a WIORT perspective, the need still exists to have minimum mandatory competencies, and this need has become more acute since our “Regulatory Options Paper”^{*} was released in 2017 – with fewer training providers offering services in the market.

Operator competency can be a complex issue to regulate due to the diversity of the water sector. There were many options explored in the Paper and WIORT is willing to discuss with any interested government options for implementing minimum mandatory competencies.

There are a few key underpinning principles which are perhaps worth reinforcing as these newer investigations are underway:

- “Minimum standards” means different things to different audiences. It is topical in broader policy debates around customer service standards, which, possibly, adds to the confusion. For the purposes of Registration and the Framework – it means having the minimum competencies required to operate the systems for which an operator is responsible. If it is a simple water treatment system (or “low complexity”^{*} system), that certainly does not mean a minimum Certificate II or III in water operations.
- There is no “One-size-fits-all” approach. Different approaches will be necessary for different providers of water services, and smaller and remote providers will need more support and investment than larger ones.
- At the time of writing there was no known active discussion or guidance anywhere in the country on what implementing a mandatory system might look like, apart from in the Paper.
- No-one knows where this might go with there being some level of interest in minimum mandatory competency concept being shown by several different regulators in several different states and territories. There are, however, a number of water utilities which have chosen to implement Registration on a voluntary basis as it’s seen as an important way of dealing with known risks, and many more utilities which have undertaken the competency vs plant process evaluation for their staff.

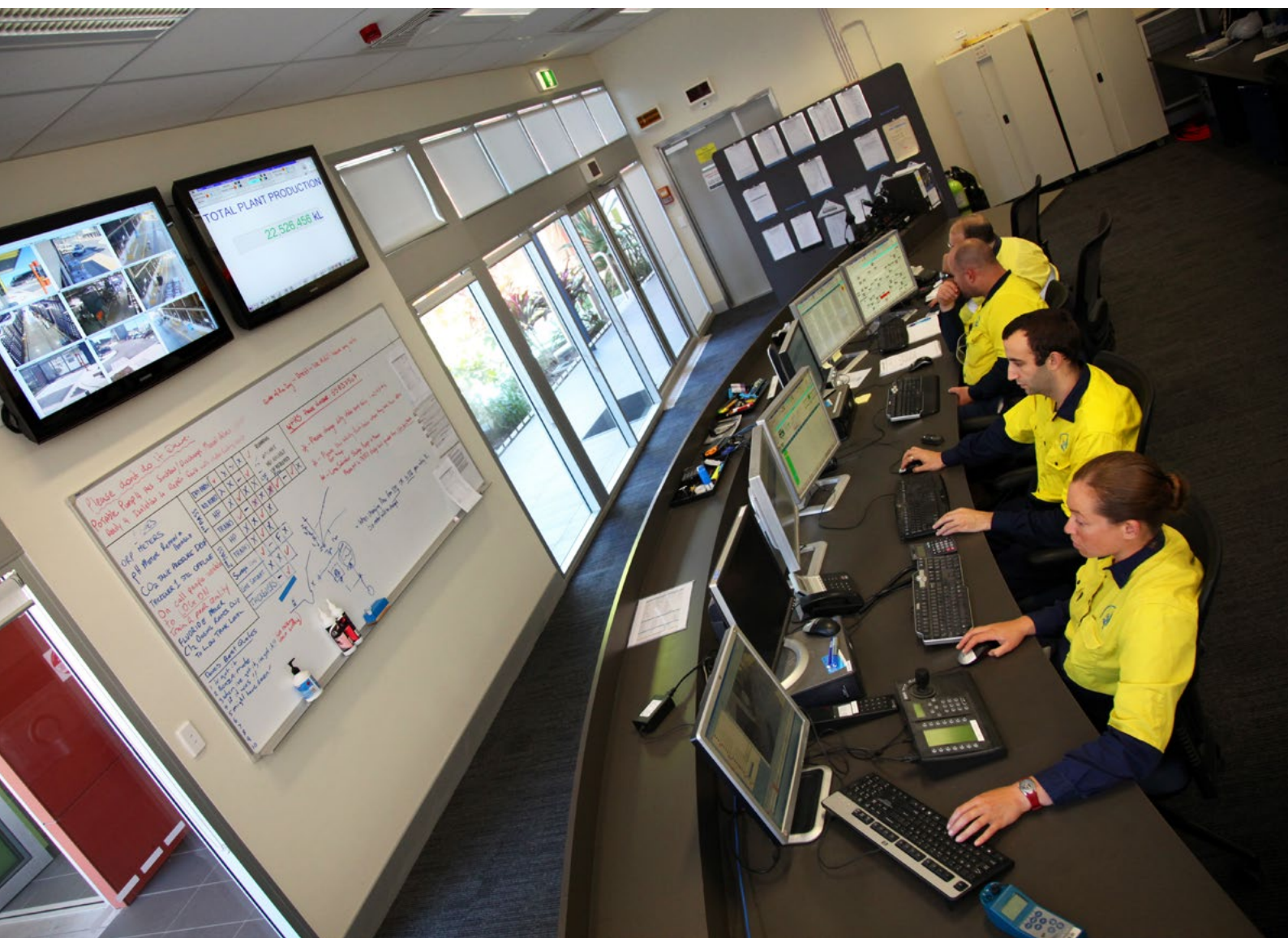
Q. What's a low complexity system?

A. As detailed in the Framework – for drinking water it will include “drinking water systems where no treatment barriers are in place, or where disinfection (chlorine or UV) is the only treatment barrier.”

In practical terms, if the Framework were to be applied, an Operator would only require a few units of competency from the NWP to be eligible for Registration if they are responsible for such a system, these units being:

- NWPGEN017 Apply the risk management principles of the water industry standards, guidelines & legislation
- NWPGEN020 Sample and test source or drinking water
- Any other specific units related to the job. In the example above this might include a unit to cover the disinfection task – most commonly liquefied chlorine or hypochlorite.

This type of grouping of some of the units necessary for a “Certificate” has been the subject of many industry investigations into training package design and funding support. The terms “Skill Sets,” “Competency Clusters,” and more recently “Micro Credentials” can, in the right context, mean the same thing as achieving Registration as an operator who is managing a low complexity system.



FIND OUT MORE ABOUT OPERATOR REGISTRATION

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