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Document type: Procedure		Issue Number: 6
Prepared by: MOB		Date: 28/06/2011

Key Words: Management review, Problems, Disagreements, Challenges

PURPOSE: To outline the process used by AUS-QUAL to handle complaints and appeals.	SCOPE: All complaints and appeals received by AUS-QUAL in relation to its certification activities.
RESPONSIBILITY: The Managing Director, or his nominee is responsible for managing the handling of complaints and appeals. Program Managers are responsible for progressing Complaints and Appeals within their area of responsibility.	SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS & REFERENCES: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AQS102 Management Review • AQM211 Notes on Certification – by AUS-QUAL • AQM010 Functional Structure • AQM011 Information and Advisory Services • AQM016 Specialist Advisory Support • SQF Guidance – General Requirements for SQF

This Procedure sets out requirements for AUS-QUAL programs generally. Specific requirements for individual programs are identified in ANNEX 1 to this Procedure.

PROCEDURES

Any client organisation or interested party who is dissatisfied with an action or decision of AUS-QUAL has a right to raise the issue with AUS-QUAL. Issues raised with AUS-QUAL in regard to its certification activities will be classified as follows according to their increasing order of importance:

- Complaints
- Appeals

- A Complaint will arise where:
 - (a) a Client Organisation questions (challenges) a decision or action by AUS-QUAL regarding any aspect of the certification process, including interpretation of a standard.
 - (b) a Client Organisation or an interested party (e.g. a customer of a client organisation) is dissatisfied with some aspect of the certification services supplied by AUS-QUAL.
Note: This may include a Complaint made by an Interested Party, to AUS-QUAL, about the apparent breakdown of the Client Organisation's management system; such complaints will be progressed without delay.
 - (c) A Regulatory Body, Scheme Owner, Accreditation Bodies raises the complaint usually in the form of a Corrective Action Request (CAR)
- An Appeal will arise when a complaint is not resolved to the satisfaction of the Person or Organisation that initiated the complaint and other Interested Parties.

COMPLAINTS

AUS-QUAL will ensure business relationships with client organizations are supported by fair and effective methods of handling complaints and appeals. Maintenance of the integrity and credibility of the certification program shall be the primary objective when dealing with complaints and any subsequent appeals. Also, the independence and impartiality of those involved in dealing with complaints and appeals shall be maintained at all times.

All complaints and appeals will be handled according AUS-QUALs policy and procedures relating to confidentiality.

Investigation of Complaints

- (a) All complaints must be submitted in writing to the Managing Director, (as per any

REFERENCES

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contractual terms and conditions) in order for them to be formally investigated. Details of the complaint will be forwarded to the Program Manager who will log the incident details. The Program Manager will determine whether or not the complaint relates to certification activities for which AUS-QUAL is responsible, or whether the complaint relates to an AUS-QUAL Certified Client. Receipt of the complaint will be acknowledged in writing.

- (b) If a complaint is received from a third party about some aspect of a Client Organisation's operations, the response will focus on the effectiveness of the Client's management system. The Client Organisation will be advised and kept informed of progress of any investigation and the outcome.
- (c) If a complaint is not formally submitted in writing, it shall be reported to the Managing Director. Such a matter may be deemed to be informal. If the matter is trivial it will be handled as diplomatically as possible. If the matter has substance, the details will be reported to the Program Manager who will log the incident details.
- (d) The Managing Director shall appoint a competent and impartial person such as the Certification Systems Manager or other Program Manager as necessary to fairly investigate each complaint.
- (e) The investigation shall be conducted in a conscientious, thorough and expeditious manner. The person conducting the investigation shall endeavour to verify all relevant facts to the complaint from original sources wherever feasible.
- (f) Resourcing of the investigation (and its scope) should be commensurate with the seriousness of the complaint. Where AUS-QUAL would be required to incur significant expenses to investigate a complaint (e.g. if remote site visits were required etc.), liability for these expenses will be agreed between the parties prior to expenditure.
- (g) In the event that an independent perspective and/or mediator is required, the Managing Director shall appoint a suitable person to act as an independent third party. Members of the Advisory Committee may be considered for this role. The person who raised the incident must agree to the "third party" person(s) selected.
- (h) Upon completion, the person performing the investigation shall provide the Managing Director with a report with recommendations for the resolution of the complaint including remedial or corrective measures.
- (i) The Managing Director shall consider the report, including appropriate verification of the outcome by an independent person, and will expeditiously take those actions necessary for the close out of the complaint and the remedy of any nonconformity within AUS-QUAL's management system. This may include acting quickly to restore certification where appropriate.
- (j) The client organisation or interested party originating the complaint shall be kept informed of progress with the investigation as necessary and will be advised in writing of the outcome. A decision will be made in conjunction with the Complainant and/or the Client Organisation as to whether details of a complaint will be made public and if so to what extent.
- (k) The Program Manager shall maintain records of all complaints in a 'Complaints Register', together with their investigation report, details of actions taken, date of close-out, and comments provided for record purposes. Each entry in the Complaints Register will be signed off following consideration of the finalised outcome at Management Review.
- (l) Any action taken in relation to a Complaint will take into account any specific provisions that may exist under individual Certification Programs.

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APPEALS AGAINST AN AUS-QUAL DECISION ON A COMPLAINT

Where a complaint is not resolved to the satisfaction of the person or organisation raising the complaint, or possibly a client organisation that is the subject of a complaint, an appeal may be lodged in writing to the Managing Director.

All appeals will be handled according AUS-QUALs policy and procedures relating to confidentiality.

- (l) The Managing Director shall contact the person or organisation lodging the appeal in order to acknowledge receipt of the appeal and to provide an opportunity for the appellant to formally present its case.
- (m) In the event that an independent perspective and/or conciliator is required, the Managing Director shall seek agreement from the appellant for the appointment of a suitable person, or persons, to act as an independent conciliator. Members of the Advisory Committee may be considered for this role.
- (n) If the Managing Director and the appellant can not agree on a suitable person, or persons, and there are no other contractual arrangements between AUS-QUAL and the appellant covering complaint resolution, the appeal will be referred to the AUS-QUAL Advisory Committee. After providing an opportunity for the appellant to formally present its case, the Advisory Committee shall determine whether the appeal warrants submission to conciliation in accordance with, and subject, to the Institute of Arbitrator Australia Rules for the Conduct of Commercial Conciliations.
- (o) Following determination of the appeal and appropriate verification of the outcome by an independent person, the Managing Director shall take those actions necessary to close out the appeal and remedy any nonconformity within AUS-QUAL's management system. This may include acting to quickly restore certification where appropriate.
- (p) The Managing Director shall provide the appellant with reports on progress with the appeal handling process, as well as the appeal findings in writing, including reasons for the decision(s) reached.
- (q) Records shall be maintained of all appeals, together with the written statement provided to the appellant, details of actions taken, date of close-out, and comments provided for record purposes.

MANAGEMENT REVIEW

AUS-QUAL views complaints and appeals as an important source of information about possible nonconformity. Accordingly, as part of AUS-QUAL's commitment to continuous improvement Management Review meetings shall consider:

- (r) the outcome(s) of any new complaints and appeals,
- (s) the progress and status of any existing complaints and appeals, and
- (t) the effectiveness of new preventative, remedial and corrective measures identified through the complaint and appeal investigation / resolution process.
- (u) sign-off of the Complaints Register by the responsible Program Manager following

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successful resolution of the Complaint.

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This Annex applies to individual Programs within the scope of AUS-QUAL's operations, the owners or custodians of which have additional requirements for the Transfer of Certification Status between CBs, over and above those outlined in this procedure.

The additional requirements for the management of this issue are set out below for the Programs concerned.

SQF

Complaints and Appeals received by AUS-QUAL

Appeals regarding decisions on the Suspension or Withdrawal of SQF Certification shall not delay the decision to Suspend or Withdraw certification.

Where a complaint is received by AUS-QUAL from a Certified Supplier, that complaint will be progressed without delay.

Where an investigation of a Complaint reveals that there has been a substantial break-down of a Supplier's SQF System, AUS-QUAL will proceed as it would in the case of a Critical Non-conformance; the requirements for which are set out in the procedure: [AQC222 Suspending Withdrawing Reinstating Certification](#)

Every effort will be made to resolve complaints within one (1) month of formal receipt of the complaint.

Complaints received by the Certified Supplier

For full details of requirements for handling Complaints to Suppliers, refer to Clause G15 of: [SQF Guidance – General Requirements for CBs offering SQF Certification](#)

In the event of a Certified Supplier receiving a Customer Complaint involving a 'Critical' or 'Major' non-conformity, AUS-QUAL must be notified immediately. Certified Suppliers are advised of this requirement in conjunction with the issue / re-issue of Certification Certificates.

The Corrective Action and subsequent follow-up required to address this non-conformity is set out in the SQF Procedure: [AQT502 SQF Handling Non-conformances](#).

Where a complaint is received by AUS-QUAL from a third party, about a Certified Supplier, that complaint will be progressed without delay.