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## HEADQUARTERS' BULLETIN

# Qualifications, Certifications, and International Recognition of Credentials

With the planned rollout of ISA's tree risk assessment qualification, ISA is setting out on a new path. We have twenty years of certification experience behind us, but we are learning quite a bit as we venture into qualifications—including where our new type of credential fits in globally.

## Qualifications Versus Certifications

In the December 2011 issue of *Arborist News*, we outlined the difference between the two types of credentials. Key differences are summarized below.

### ISA Qualifications

ISA qualifications are currently being developed under the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) E2659-09 standard. The plan is for ISA to develop a number of qualification programs over time. We envision the programs to comprise a few days of training, immediately followed by an assessment. For each program, we will establish a period of validity based in part on how frequently new knowledge and skills are developed in each subject area. Once that period has expired, a person will have to take the program again to ensure that they have received training in current knowledge and methods. Programs will vary to some extent, but we anticipate that most of them will follow this model.

Because qualifications are so different from certifications, we are developing a separate set of policies and procedures for them. For instance, certification policies require a strict wall of separation between the exam and preparatory training. Anyone who sees exam questions is not allowed to help candidates to prepare to take the exam or to develop

any training materials. By contrast, a qualifications instructor will usually be very familiar with the exam and might even administer it. This is because the program focuses on a specific set of learning outcomes that need to be tested. Again, by contrast, certification exams focus on testing a broad body of knowledge that a person gains through education and experience.

ISA qualifications differ from certifications. They share important similarities with qualifications offered worldwide, but they also have their own unique characteristics that make them different from the types of qualifications that people in the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand, Australia, and elsewhere may be familiar with.

## ISA Qualifications and National Qualifications Frameworks

The UK, New Zealand, Australia, and several other countries have well-established national qualifications frameworks, tied to their educational frameworks. Under these frameworks, a qualification or set of qualifications has a status similar to a diploma in the United States. In fact, diplomas and other academic degrees are usually included within the national frameworks. The frameworks define various levels, from basic through highly advanced, and designate which qualifications satisfy the requirements of each level.

Qualifications under these frameworks differ from the qualifications that ISA is developing:

- In both cases, qualifications are tied to well-defined, measurable learning outcomes; however, under the national frameworks, a specific training program is not always an integral part of the credentialing process.

By contrast, ISA's qualifications require a training component.

- The period of time required to obtain qualifications under the national frameworks typically varies from several weeks to several years; ISA qualifications will be tied to short-term training programs of several days' duration, with the possibility that there may be programs that combine a series of short trainings.
- The national frameworks often include provision for recognition of prior learning without undergoing a specific training, where ISA credentials will require training as part of the program.

## A summary of the difference between qualifications and certifications.

Qualification	Certification
The exam assesses a defined set of learning outcomes.	The exam assesses a broad body of knowledge.
The program includes training as an integral component.	Certification is independent of any specific training program.
Assessment questions may be well known to trainers.	Exam questions are shielded from anyone teaching preparatory courses or developing preparatory material.
Trainers may assess their own trainees, depending on the requirements of a given program.	Trainers may not assess their own trainees.
Qualifications may be valid for life, but many have a set period of validity. Credential holders must retrain and retest at the end of that period if they want to continue to hold the credential.	The credential is periodically renewed, subject to recertification requirements, such as participation in continuing education opportunities.

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## Headquarters' Bulletin (continued)

- National-framework qualifications are typically good for life; although some ISA qualifications may be good for life, most will have a set period of validity, after which they will expire.

## International Recognition of Credentials

Under the UK, New Zealand, and Australian frameworks, equivalences can often be made between credentials issued one country and those issued in another country. As we develop ISA qualifications, we seek to establish equivalencies between ISA qualifications and national-framework qualification levels. The possibilities are truly exciting, as they would help arborists who work internationally to have their hard-earned credentials recognized across national borders.

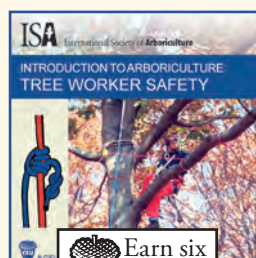
Establishing such equivalencies for qualifications will take ISA into new territory: We have not established any national-framework equivalencies for our certifications. Our certifications are recognized internationally, and they are fully transferrable among countries. In fact, the ISA Certified Arborist® credential is accredited under an International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standard. In spite of this recognition, employers are not always sure how our certifications equate with the nationally based credentials that they are familiar with.

It is important for our credential holders that employers can readily understand what knowledge and skills they bring to the table. Therefore, we have investigated whether we can equate ISA certifications to the various levels within the national frameworks. The short answer is that it is complicated; the types of credentials are not similar enough in scope and objectives. For example, unlike qualifications, certifications do not have a training component and are not tied to specific learning outcomes. Another important difference is that qualifications do not typically have a continuing education component, whereas commitment to continuing professional education is a hallmark of certification.

Even though we have not been able to equate ISA certifications to national-framework qualifications levels, the Certification Board seeks to recognize national-framework qualification levels as eligibility criteria for taking certification exams. Qualification at an appropriate level would make a candidate eligible to take a certification exam, but the candidate would still have to take the exam.

With our venture into qualifications, we believe it will be easier to equate ISA qualifications to national-framework qualification levels. It is a new pathway that we are eager to explore. We continue research and outreach for mutual recognition of credentials across national borders to foster transnational recognition of expertise. It all comes back to the value we place on a robust global exchange of tree care knowledge and practice. A•N

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