

# AS 1657:2018: Understanding The Newly Revised AS 1657 Height Safety Standard

One of Australia's highest selling standards of all time has just been revised and released because it was far too unwieldy. The chair of the committee responsible for AS 1657, which deals with fixed platforms, walkways, stairways and ladders, had been inundated with calls for help interpreting the Standard.

The result is dozens of changes to the 2013 standard, many of them minor, that necessitate hours of mind-bending time spent poring over this highly technical document.

Among the 32 changes are adjustments to platforms, which must be larger than previously prescribed and are now measured from a different point but no longer need to be level. Depending on your interpretation of the Standard, platforms and landings can have a slope of up to three degrees to accommodate "flat" roofs or a cross slope of seven degrees (see 7.4.3.5).

The dimensional change to platforms is encapsulated in Clause 7.3.6 (a) and Fig 7.5. Compare the two clauses:

*" The minimum length of the landing shall be not less than 900 mm, measured horizontally from the front of the ladder. "*

– AS 1657: 2013

versus

*" The minimum length of the landing shall be not less than 900 mm, measured horizontally from the face of the lowest rung of the ladder, as shown in Figure 7.5. "*

– AS 1657: 2018

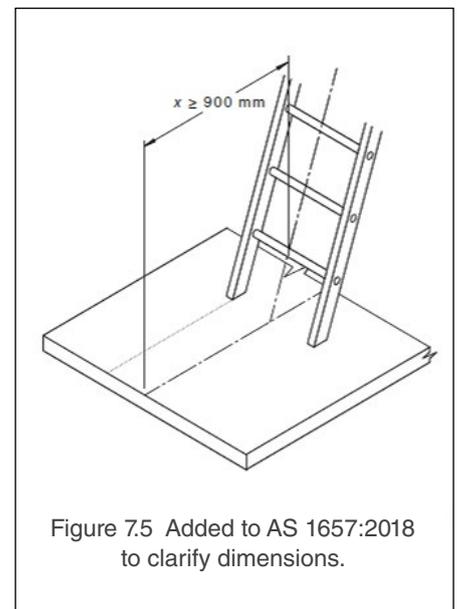


Figure 7.5 Added to AS 1657:2018 to clarify dimensions.

The bevy of other changes to AS 1657 range from the removal of the definition of "may," despite its continued use throughout the document to other legalistic shifts, which hint at the technicality of the Standard.

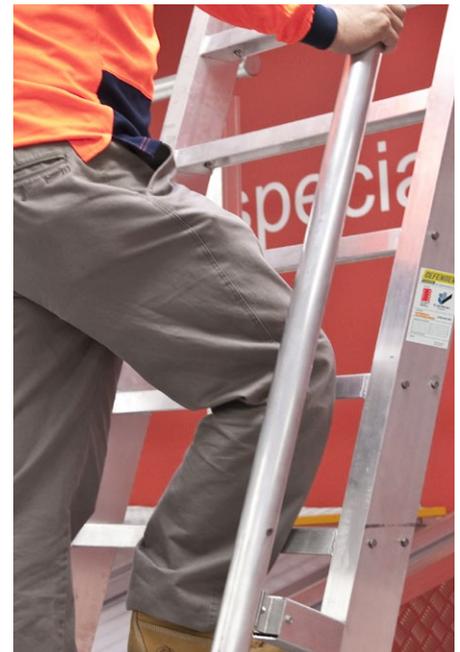
Put simply, Australian Standard AS 1657 is a benchmark for what is considered “reasonably practicable” in a court of law rather than a complete user guide to practical height safety. It does not pretend to cover the other elements enshrined in OHS practice.

AS 1657 needs to be understood in the context of falls regulations, codes, the WHS Act and the workplace itself.

This is particularly stark when it comes to the consideration of the task and user skill levels. Height safety measures on the roof of a school gymnasium, for example, needs to be quite different from that in the petrochemical industry.

While both must follow the unique hierarchy of controls set out in the falls regulations, the frequency of the task pales into insignificance. The risk to the typical PE teachers faced with retrieving a wayward ball using a harness-based system is much higher than for professional riggers scaling a mast.

The 2018 edition of AS 1657 is certainly an improvement on the 2013 standard but use it with caution and engage an expert to help interpret the sometimes apparently conflicting guidance it provides. workplace access&safety®



**About the Author:**

**Carl Sachs, Managing Director at Workplace Access & Safety and Fall Prevention Expert**

Carl Sachs is the managing director and falls prevention specialist at Workplace Access & Safety, and takes an active role in the development of fall prevention standards. Mr Sachs was a member of the committee responsible for revising the original AS 1657 and represents the Facility Management Association (FMA) on committees responsible for Australian Standards dealing with working at heights, AS/NZS 1891 and AS/NZS 5532.

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Victoria (Head Office) 42-46 Cochrane Rd., Moorabbin VIC 3189  
New South Wales • Queensland • South Australia • Western Australia

