



Qualifications
& Credit
Framework

Guidance for using level descriptors within the Qualifications and Credit Framework

Version 4



This guidance has been developed to help users to understand the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) level descriptors and use them appropriately for developing and positioning units.

The QCF level descriptors can be found in Annex E of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (Ofqual/08/3726).

What are the level descriptors?

The Qualifications and Credit Framework comprises nine levels, from Entry level to level 8, and covers all kinds of achievement. The level descriptors provide a general, shared understanding of learning and achievement at each of these nine levels. As the framework aims to be inclusive, the level descriptors are designed to enable their use across a wide range of learning contexts.

The level descriptors build on those developed through the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS),¹ the existing level descriptors of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), and a range of level descriptors from frameworks in the UK and internationally.² The five upper levels are intended to be consistent with the levels of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The purpose of the level descriptors

The level descriptors provide a guideline on level to practitioners involved in the design and delivery of units.

Unit developers should use their professional expertise to apply the level descriptors to their own subject area or context. Where appropriate,

they should also use their knowledge and understanding of relevant levelling tools such as sector- or subject-specific descriptors.

Key features

- Level is an indication of the relative demand made on the learner, the complexity and/or depth of achievement, and the learner's autonomy in demonstrating that achievement.
- The level descriptors are concerned with the outcomes of learning and not the process of learning or the method of assessment. They are designed to guide the development of units to sit within the framework. They provide a set of constructs against which the unit and its proposed learning outcomes and assessment criteria can be compared, in order to ensure that it matches the intended level.
- Each level is described in terms of a range of generic indicators that characterise that particular level. These indicators are set out in Annex E of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (Ofqual/08/3726).
- The indicators for each level are grouped into three categories:
 - knowledge and understanding
 - application and action
 - autonomy and accountability.

All units are likely to reflect aspects of all three categories, although many units will focus on one or two of the three.

- The descriptors describe the level rather than the characteristics of individual units, and there is no expectation that every unit in the QCF should have all of the characteristics of a given level.

¹The NICATS project began in April 1996 and was completed in March 1999. The NICATS level descriptors were produced as part of that project and were widely adopted, making them a useful starting point for the QCF level descriptors.

²Level descriptors from the following areas were considered as part of the desk research for the framework descriptors: FHEQ; Ufi; SCQF; NICATS; CQFW; SEEC; NQAI; Dublin Descriptors; New Zealand Qualifications Authority; Australian Qualifications Framework; South African Qualifications Authority; EQF; ECVET; Victorian Qualifications Authority Credit Matrix.

- The individual indicators are designed to aid the development and positioning of units in relation to the appropriate level; they should not normally be used as (or adapted to become) learning outcomes within individual units.
- A unit can be assigned to one level only.
- Framework levels are not related to years of study.
- The descriptors are indicative of achievement at a particular level; they do not distinguish performance within a level.
- Some sectors may wish to contextualise the level descriptors for their own use.

Entry level descriptors

Entry level has three sub-levels that describe achievements at Entry levels 1, 2 and 3. These are designed to facilitate the design of units and qualifications that allow incremental achievement and progress.

In the design of units for Entry level, the progression needs of learners should be taken into account. The level descriptors have been designed to facilitate this progression in the broadest terms, but unit developers will need to consider how the statements of these descriptors are interpreted for particular units, learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

Recognising achievements below Entry level 1

The level descriptor for Entry level 1 includes achievements currently known as 'pre-Entry'. The descriptor is based on a continuum of achievement from basic interactions, such as awareness of others, to the consolidation of skills, knowledge and understanding. A learner may be at any point along this continuum, and it is not necessary for

a learner working at Entry level 1 to start at the beginning.

The continuum is best used to track the progress of learners working within Entry level 1 and to record progress towards learning goals and targets, which are appropriately challenging and motivating for the learner. These learning goals and targets may be agreed between the learner and tutor on an individual basis, or by unit developers in the form of learning outcomes and assessment criteria.³

How to use the level descriptors

The level descriptors may be used in two ways:

- to guide the development of units by ensuring that a unit's learning outcomes and assessment criteria reflect the level expressed in the relevant descriptor; this approach involves using the level indicators to guide the writing of the unit, particularly for comparing the proposed learning outcomes and assessment criteria with the level requirements
- to locate units in the framework where they have been developed independently; this approach will be relevant to existing units as well as where a unit's learning outcomes and assessment criteria are driven by specific requirements such as validating occupational competence.

Unit developers will need to match each unit to the expected level descriptor and should read the level above and below for comparison. A dominant level for each unit can be established by comparing the unit's overall aims, learning outcomes and assessment criteria with the level indicators.

The overall level of the unit is determined by the pattern of indicators that match the learning

³ Further information that may help unit developers set appropriate learning outcomes and assessment criteria at this level may be found in Dee, L., Byers, R., Hayhoe, H. and Maudslay, L. (2002), *Enhancing quality of life* (University of Cambridge/SKILL), or within the 'Foundation learning' section of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) website (www.qcda.gov.uk/qcf).

outcomes and assessment criteria. If one level is matched across the unit, that would be the level assigned to the unit. Where more than one level is matched to a unit then the process of 'best fit' should be used to find the dominant level. If a dominant level is difficult to find, additional evidence will be needed for any decision on level or the unit will need to be redesigned to better reflect a single level.

It is important to test and verify the levels proposed, for instance by asking a panel of experts to reach a consensus about the level of the unit, through peer review, or using another form of independent expert evaluation.

A suggested approach for checking the level of current units

The process below can be used to check the level of a unit, but it is not the only approach. Professional judgement should be used in deciding the final level. Before starting, consider the overall aim and emphasis of the unit.

For instance:

- if it is principally concerned with knowledge and understanding, then the indicators in this category will be the most important in deciding the level — although the way in which the knowledge and understanding is demonstrated and the level of self-direction expected of the learners, should be in line with the indicators in the application and action category, and the autonomy and accountability category respectively
- if it is principally concerned with occupational competence, then the indicators in the application and action category, and possibly the autonomy and accountability category, are likely to be the most important — although the level of knowledge and understanding used should also show a broad match with the relevant indicators, even if knowledge is demonstrated tacitly.

The following five steps are suggested to reach a decision on level. Each step is equally important.

1. Looking at the unit as a whole in relation to the relevant descriptor, what appears to be its dominant level? What's the consensus on this and how is it established?
2. What level does each learning outcome match? Taken as a whole, what level do the learning outcomes infer? Do any learning outcomes need to be reviewed to better reflect the overall level?
3. What level does each assessment criterion match? Taken as a whole, what level do the assessment criteria infer? Do any assessment criteria need to be rewritten to better reflect the overall level?
4. Is there a discrepancy between (a) the dominant level of the unit as a whole and (b) the level indicated by the learning outcomes and/or assessment criteria? If so, what is the reason? Does it suggest revising any of the learning outcomes or assessment criteria to better match the overall level?
5. If there is a difference between the level proposed for the unit and the findings in the steps above, what is your rationale for pitching the unit at a higher or lower level? This should be argued in terms of the relevant level descriptor and not, for instance, where the unit fits into a qualification structure, progression route or sequence of other units. If there is no clear rationale, then you may need to reconsider either the level you are claiming for the unit or revise the unit content to reflect the target level.

A suggested format for recording the level of a unit

Unit title		Level	
Category	Level indicated	Emphasis within unit (strong, medium or low)	Comments
Knowledge and understanding			
Application and action			
Autonomy and accountability			
Overall level			

More information

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The Qualifications and Credit Framework will form part of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW). The CQFW embraces all post-16 and higher education in Wales. Further details can be found at www.cqfw.net.

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