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# Guidance for using unit level descriptors within the Qualifications and Credit Framework tests and trials

Version 1



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government



Rewarding Learning

This guidance has been developed to help users understand the new framework level descriptors and use them appropriately.

## What are the level descriptors?

The regulatory authorities are committed to developing a jointly regulated Qualifications and Credit Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This framework comprises a range of levels from Entry level to level 8 and covers all types of achievement. The level descriptors provide a general, shared understanding of learning and achievement at each of these nine levels. As the framework is inclusive, the level descriptors are designed to be used across a wide range of learning contexts.

The level descriptors build on those developed through the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS)<sup>1</sup>, the existing level descriptors of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and a range of level descriptors from frameworks in the UK and internationally<sup>2</sup>. They are designed to be consistent (at higher levels) with the levels of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### 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 and use their knowledge and understanding of relevant levelling tools, such as sector or subject-specific level descriptors or any other tools that help in determining the level of a unit.

### General features of the level descriptors

- Level is an indication of the relative demand, complexity and/or depth of achievement and of the learner 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.
- The level descriptors are designed to guide the development of units to sit within the framework. They provide a set of constructs against which proposed learning outcomes and assessment criteria can be compared, in order to ensure that the unit is written at 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 *Level descriptors for positioning units in the Qualifications and Credit Framework tests and trials* ([www.qca.org.uk/framework/](http://www.qca.org.uk/framework/)) and are listed under three broad categories:
  - knowledge and understanding
  - application and action
  - autonomy and accountability.
- The three broad categories are intended to be indicative and not prescriptive. A unit is not required to encompass all three categories. The level descriptors are not intended to be comprehensive statements and there is no expectation that every unit in the framework should have all of the characteristics of a given level – it is a ‘best fit’ that is sought.
- A unit can be assigned to one level only.
- Framework levels are not related to years of study.
- The level descriptors are indicative of achievement at a particular level – they do not distinguish between performance within a level. Grading, where it is to be used, is a separate and additional exercise to determining level. Grading is an assessment activity applied to work and performance by individuals, whereas levels provide benchmarks against which individual work and performance can be judged.
- Some sectors may wish to contextualise the level descriptors for their own use.

### Entry level descriptors

The Entry level descriptor has three sublevels that describe achievements at Entry 1, 2 and 3.

These are designed to:

- establish an Entry level that is inclusive of achievements below the current NQF Entry 1
- 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 will need to 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 achievement below Entry level 1

The level descriptor for Entry level 1 includes achievements currently known as ‘pre-Entry’. The level 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; 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 that are appropriately challenging and motivating for the learner. These learning goals and targets may be agreed between the learner and their tutor, or by unit developers in the form of learning outcomes and assessment criteria<sup>3</sup>.

## 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 level descriptors. This approach involves using the level descriptors to guide the writing of the unit and, in particular, for comparing the proposed learning outcomes and assessment criteria with the indicators in the relevant level descriptor
- to locate units in the framework where they have been developed independently. This approach will be relevant to existing units and 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 ‘best fit’ level for each can be established by comparing the unit’s learning outcomes and assessment criteria with the level indicators from the three broad categories.

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

It is important to test and verify the levels proposed for a unit by seeking comments from other experts. For example, by asking a panel of experts to reach a consensus about the level of the unit or through peer review or other form of independent expert evaluation.

### Who’s it for?

The level descriptors will be used during the testing and trialling phase of the framework from 2006 to 2008. Their appropriateness will be monitored throughout and a full evaluation of all the key features of the framework will be conducted at the end of that period.

### How to check the level of current units – one approach

The process below can be used to check the level of a unit. It is not the only approach.

Professional judgement should be used in deciding the final level.

- (1) What level does each learning outcome match to?  
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?
- (2) What level does each assessment criteria match to?  
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?
- (3) Looking at the unit as a whole, what level appears to be its ‘best fit’?  
What’s the consensus on this and how is it established?  
If this differs from either of the above results, what is the reason?
- (4) If there is a discrepancy between the proposed level and the findings in 1–3, 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, not for instance where the unit fits into a qualification structure, progression route or sequence of other units. If there isn’t a clear rationale, then you may need to reconsider either the level you are claiming for it, or revise the unit specification to reflect the appropriate level.

Each step in this process is equally important. However, you may want to approach the process in a different order, for instance by looking at the unit as a whole as the first step and then looking at matching the learning outcomes and assessment criteria to the level descriptors.

### How to record the process for determining the level of a unit – one approach

The table below can be used to record the level of a unit. It is not the only approach.

Unit title	Level	
Category	Level	Comments
Knowledge and understanding		
Application and action		
Autonomy and accountability		
Overall level		

<sup>1</sup> The 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 framework level descriptors.

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

<sup>3</sup> Further information that may help unit developers set appropriate learning outcomes and assessment criteria at this level may be found via SKILL ‘Enhancing Quality of Life’, Cambridge and SKILL, Dee, L., Byres, R., Hayhoe, H., and Maudslay, L. (2002), or from P-scales ([www.qca.org.uk/8798.html](http://www.qca.org.uk/8798.html)), or within the ‘Foundation learning tier’ section on the QCA website.