

National Qualifications Framework - Level descriptors

1. Introduction

These descriptors set out the characteristic generic outcomes of each level. They are intended to provide a general, shared understanding of each level. They are not intended to be prescriptive or comprehensive statements, and there is no expectation that every unit and qualification should have all of the characteristics.

As the term 'generic' implies, the descriptors are intended to integrate vocational, academic and professional aspects of learning and apply to all learning contexts; classwork, practical work, and work-based learning. They have been developed with the intention that unit and qualification developers will use their professional expertise to translate them into their own subject areas and they will be kept under review in the light of feedback on their use¹.

The level descriptors can be used as a guide to the writing of learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria for units, to assign level to units and qualifications. The descriptors should be seen as a developmental continuum, i.e. each level subsumes the characteristics of lower levels.

2. Definition and scope of Categories²

Intellectual Skills and Attributes

This category reflects knowledge and understanding, application, analysis, synthesis/creativity and evaluation. This category also encapsulates psychomotor skills, self-appraisal/reflection of practice, planning and management of learning, problem solving, communication and presentation, interactive and group skills. Transferable skills overlap with the Key Skills and therefore Northern Ireland descriptors reflect their development.

Processes

Processes refer to the operational contexts within which the learner performs and include the tasks and procedures required.

Accountability

The term accountability is understood as a broad concept embracing the underpinning attributes of autonomy, responsibility and ethical understanding. While accepting that increasing autonomy is an essential feature of a learner's progression through the levels continuum, it is constrained by ethical considerations.

¹These descriptors consist of the NICATS descriptors, also used in Wales, together with additional material, commissioned by QCA, which has been included as a result of consultation.

²The categories used are NICATS categories, and thus these definitions are those used by NICATS.

Level	Intellectual Skills and Attributes	Processes	Accountability
Entry	<p>Employ recall and demonstrate elementary comprehension in a narrow range of areas with dependency on ideas of others</p> <p>Exercise basic skills</p> <p>Receive and pass on information</p>	<p>Operate mainly in closely defined and highly structured contexts</p> <p>Carry out processes that are repetitive and predictable</p> <p>Undertake the performance of clearly defined tasks</p> <p>Assume a limited range of roles</p>	<p>Carry out directed activity under close supervision</p> <p>Rely entirely on external monitoring of output and quality</p>
1	<p>Employ a narrow range of applied knowledge and basic comprehension</p> <p>Demonstrate a narrow range of skills</p> <p>Apply known solutions familiar problems</p> <p>Present and record information from readily available sources</p>	<p>Show basic competence in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts</p> <p>Utilise a clear choice of routine responses</p> <p>Co-operate with others</p>	<p>Exercise a very limited degree of discretion and judgement about possible actions</p> <p>Carry restricted responsibility for quantity and quality of output</p> <p>Operate under direct supervision and quality control</p>
2	<p>Apply knowledge with underpinning comprehension in a number of areas</p> <p>Make comparisons</p> <p>Interpret available Information</p> <p>Demonstrate a range of skills</p>	<p>Choose from a range of procedures performed in a number of contexts, some of which may be non- routine</p> <p>Co-ordinate with others</p>	<p>Undertake directed activity with a degree of autonomy</p> <p>Achieve outcomes within time constraints</p> <p>Accept increased responsibility for quantity and quality of output subject to external quality checking</p>

Level	Intellectual Skills and Attributes	Processes	Accountability
3	<p>Apply knowledge and skills in a range of complex activities, demonstrating comprehension of relevant theories</p> <p>Access and evaluate information independently</p> <p>Analyse information and make reasoned judgements</p> <p>Employ a range of responses to well defined but often unfamiliar or unpredictable problems</p>	<p>Operate in a variety of familiar and unfamiliar contexts using a range technical or learning skills</p> <p>Select from a considerable choice of procedures</p> <p>Give presentations to an audience</p>	<p>Engage in self directed activity with guidance/evaluation</p> <p>Accept responsibility for quantity and quality of output</p> <p>Accept limited responsibility for the quantity and quality of the output of others</p>
4	<p>Develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base</p> <p>Employ a range of specialised skills</p> <p>Determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable problems</p> <p>Generate a range of responses, a limited number of which are innovative, to well defined but often unfamiliar problems</p> <p>Evaluate information, using it to plan and develop investigative strategies</p>	<p>Operate in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities</p> <p>Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, selecting or presenting information, methods or resources</p>	<p>Undertake self directed and a limited amount of directive activity</p> <p>Operate within broad general guidelines or functions</p> <p>Take responsibility for the nature and quantity of outputs</p> <p>Meet specified quality standards</p>

Level	Intellectual Skills and Attributes	Processes	Accountability
5	<p>Generate ideas through the analysis of information and concepts at an abstract level</p> <p>Command wide ranging, specialised technical, creative and/or conceptual skills.</p> <p>Formulate appropriate responses to resolve well defined and abstract problems.</p> <p>Analyse, reformat and evaluate a wide range of information</p>	<p>Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of technical, professional or management functions</p> <p>Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions related to products, services, operations or processes</p>	<p>Accept responsibility and accountability within broad parameters for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes</p>
6	<p>Critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge</p> <p>Utilise highly specialised technical or scholastic skills across an area of study</p> <p>Utilise research skills</p> <p>Critically evaluate new information, concepts and evidence from a range of sources</p>	<p>Transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of situations</p> <p>Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes including resourcing</p>	<p>Accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes</p> <p>Begin to lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups</p>

Level	Intellectual Skills and Attributes	Processes	Accountability
7	<p>Display mastery of a complex and specialised area of knowledge and skills</p> <p>Demonstrate expertise in highly specialised and advanced technical, professional and/or research skills</p>	<p>Conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, using and modifying advanced skills and tools</p> <p>Design and apply appropriate research methodologies</p> <p>Communicate results of research to peers</p> <p>Develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques</p> <p>Act in a wide variety of unpredictable and advanced professional contexts.</p>	<p>Accept accountability in related decision making including use of supervision</p> <p>Take significant responsibility for the work of other professional staff; lead and initiate activity.</p>
8	<p>Make a significant and original contribution to a specialised field of enquiry</p> <p>Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge</p>	<p>Demonstrate command of methodological issues</p> <p>Communicate results of research to peers and engage in critical dialogue</p> <p>Develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials</p>	<p>Accept accountability in related decision making including use of supervision</p> <p>Lead and originate complex social processes.</p>