

Qualification and Component Levels

Requirements and Guidance for All Awarding Organisations and All Qualifications

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1 Introduction

About this document

- 1.1 In September 2015, we introduced our new Regulated Qualification Framework (RQF). We did this by publishing new *General Conditions of Recognition*¹ which require awarding organisations to take a consistent approach to determining the level, and describing the size, of regulated qualifications.
- 1.2 This document supports those General Conditions of Recognition, by setting out requirements and guidance for assigning levels to regulated qualifications and (where appropriate) their components.

About these requirements and guidance

- 1.3 Condition E9.3(c) allows us to specify requirements which an awarding organisation must follow, and guidance to which an awarding organisation must have regard, when assigning –
 - (a) a level to a qualification,
 - (b) more than one level to a qualification, and
 - (c) a level to a Component of a qualification.
- 1.4 The rest of this document is structured as follows:
 - (a) Section 2 sets out our level requirements.
 - (b) Section 3 sets out level descriptors that awarding organisations must use when selecting the appropriate level to assign to a qualification.
 - (c) Section 4 sets out our guidance on level and level descriptors.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/general-conditions-of-recognition

2 Level requirements

2.1 Condition E9.3(c) allows us to specify requirements which an awarding organisation must follow when assigning –

- (a) a level to a qualification,
- (b) more than one level to a qualification, and
- (c) a level to a Component of a qualification.

2.2 We set out our requirements for the purposes of Condition E9.3(c) in paragraphs 2.3 to 2.5 below.

Assigning a level to a qualification

2.3 When assigning a level to each of its qualifications in accordance with Condition E9.1, an awarding organisation must use the level descriptors set out in section 3 below to select the most appropriate level to assign to that qualification.

Assigning more than one level to a qualification

2.4 When assigning more than one level to a qualification an awarding organisation must –

- (a) be satisfied that the range of achievement recognised by the qualification is sufficient to span more than one level,
- (b) use the level descriptors set out in section 3 below to select the most appropriate levels to assign to that qualification,
- (c) have a clear rationale for assigning more than one level to that qualification, and
- (d) publish that rationale.

Assigning a level to a component of a qualification

2.5 When assigning a level to a Component of a qualification in accordance with Condition E9.2 an awarding organisation must –

- (a) use the level descriptors set out in section 3 below to select the most appropriate level to assign to that Component, and

- (b) take all reasonable steps to ensure that the level assigned to each Component is appropriate when considered against the level assigned to the qualification as a whole.

3 Level descriptors

- 3.1 The level descriptors are divided into two categories –
- (a) knowledge and understanding; and
 - (b) skills.
- 3.2 There is a knowledge descriptor and a skills descriptor for each level within the framework. The descriptors apply to all the qualifications we regulate, general and vocational, and so many of the descriptors have an “and/or” construction to indicate their applicability to the knowledge and skills associated with the study of a subject or in preparation for a job or role.
- 3.3 The level descriptors build on those used within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Levels 4–8 are intended to be consistent with the five levels within the Framework for Higher Education Qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ).
- 3.4 The descriptors set out the generic knowledge and skills associated with the typical holder of a qualification at that level. The level descriptors are framed as outcomes and each category starts with a stem statement (“the holder can...”) which then links into the outcomes associated with each level of the framework.
- 3.5 The descriptors for the knowledge and skills associated with Entry 1 achievement are the exception to this. The Entry 1 descriptors are based on a continuum of achievement which can be used to track and recognise progress towards the achievement of student-centred targets.
- 3.6 None of the descriptors is intended to point to the process of learning or to specific assessment methods.

| Level | Knowledge descriptor (the holder...) | Skills descriptor (the holder can...) |
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| Entry 1 | Progresses along a continuum that ranges from the most elementary of achievements to beginning to make use of knowledge and/or understanding that relate to the subject or immediate environment. | Progress along a continuum that ranges from the most elementary of achievements to beginning to make use of skills that relate to the subject or the immediate environment. |

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| Entry 2 | <p>Has basic knowledge or understanding of a subject and/or can carry out simple, familiar tasks; and</p> <p>Knows the steps needed to complete simple activities.</p> | <p>Carry out simple, familiar tasks and activities. Follow instructions or use rehearsed steps to complete tasks and activities.</p> |
| Entry 3 | <p>Has basic knowledge and understanding to carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts; and</p> <p>Knows and understands the steps needed to complete structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts.</p> | <p>Carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts. Be aware of the consequences of actions for self and others.</p> |
| L1 | <p>Has basic factual knowledge of a subject and/or knowledge of facts, procedures and ideas to complete well-defined routine tasks and address simple problems; and</p> <p>Is aware of aspects of information relevant to the area of study or work.</p> | <p>Use basic cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined routine tasks and procedures.</p> <p>Select and use relevant information.</p> <p>Identify whether actions have been effective.</p> |
| L2 | <p>Has knowledge and understanding of facts, procedures and ideas in an area of study or field of work to complete well-defined tasks and address straightforward problems.</p> <p>Can interpret relevant information and ideas.</p> <p>Is aware of a range of information that is relevant to the area of study or work.</p> | <p>Select and use relevant cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined, generally routine tasks and address straightforward problems.</p> <p>Identify, gather and use relevant information to inform actions.</p> <p>Identify how effective actions have been.</p> |
| L3 | <p>Has factual, procedural and theoretical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to complete tasks and address problems that while</p> | <p>Identify, select and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills, methods and procedures to address problems that while well-</p> |

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| | <p>well-defined, may be complex and non-routine.</p> <p>Can interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas.</p> <p>Is aware of the nature of the area of study or work.</p> <p>Is aware of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.</p> | <p>defined, may be complex and non-routine.</p> <p>Use appropriate investigation to inform actions.</p> <p>Review how effective methods and actions have been.</p> |
| L4 | <p>Has practical, theoretical or technical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to address problems that are well defined but complex and non-routine.</p> <p>Can analyse, interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas.</p> <p>Is aware of the nature of approximate scope of the area of study or work.</p> <p>Has an informed awareness of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.</p> | <p>Identify, adapt and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills to inform actions and address problems that are complex and non-routine while normally fairly well-defined.</p> <p>Review the effectiveness and appropriateness of methods, actions and results.</p> |
| L5 | <p>Has practical, theoretical or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to find ways forward in broadly defined, complex contexts.</p> <p>Can analyse, interpret and evaluate relevant information, concepts and ideas.</p> <p>Is aware of the nature and scope of the area of study or work.</p> <p>Understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the reasoning behind them.</p> | <p>Determine, adapt and use appropriate methods, cognitive and practical skills to address broadly defined, complex problems.</p> <p>Use relevant research or development to inform actions.</p> <p>Evaluate actions, methods and results.</p> |

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| L6 | <p>Has advanced practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to create ways forward in contexts where there are many interacting factors.</p> <p>Understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the theories that underpin them.</p> <p>Can critically analyse, interpret and evaluate complex information, concepts and ideas.</p> | <p>Determine, refine, adapt and use appropriate methods and advanced cognitive and practical skills to address problems that have limited definition and involve many interacting factors.</p> <p>Use and, where appropriate, design relevant research and development to inform actions.</p> <p>Evaluate actions, methods and results and their implications.</p> |
| L7 | <p>Reformulates and uses practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to create ways forward in contexts where there are many interacting factors.</p> <p>Critically analyses, interprets and evaluates complex information, concepts and theories to produce modified conceptions.</p> <p>Understands the wider contexts in which the area of study or work is located.</p> <p>Understands current developments in the area of study or work.</p> <p>Understands different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how they affect the area of study or work.</p> | <p>Use specialised skills to conceptualise and address problematic situations that involve many interacting factors.</p> <p>Determine and use appropriate methodologies and approaches.</p> <p>Design and undertake research, development or strategic activities to inform or produce change in the area of work or study.</p> <p>Critically evaluate actions, methods and results and their short- and long-term implications.</p> |
| L8 | <p>Develops original practical, conceptual or technological understanding to create ways forward in contexts that lack definition and where there are</p> | <p>Use advanced and specialised skills and techniques to conceptualise and address problematic situations that</p> |

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| <p>many complex, interacting factors.</p> <p>Critically analyses, interprets and evaluates complex information, concepts and theories to produce new knowledge and theories.</p> <p>Understands and reconceptualises the wider contexts in which the field of knowledge or work is located.</p> <p>Extends a field of knowledge or work by contributing original knowledge and thinking.</p> <p>Exercises critical understanding of different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how they affect the field of knowledge or work.</p> | <p>involve many complex, interacting factors.</p> <p>Formulate and use appropriate methodologies and approaches.</p> <p>Initiate, design and undertake research, development or strategic activities that extend or produce significant change in the field of work or study.</p> <p>Critically evaluate actions, methods and results and their short- and long-term implications for the field of work or knowledge and its wider context.</p> |
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4 Guidance on level and level descriptors

- 4.1 Condition E9.3(c) allows us to specify guidance to which an awarding organisation must have regard when assigning –
- (a) a level to a qualification
 - (b) more than one level to a qualification
 - (c) a level to a Component of a qualification
- 4.2 We set out our guidance for the purposes of Condition E9.3(c) in paragraphs 4.3 to 4.8 below.

Who can use the level descriptors?

- 4.3 The level descriptors must be used by awarding organisations when they are assigning a level to a qualification and a Component of a qualification. Level descriptors can also be used by –
- students and other users – to understand and interpret the level of qualifications,
 - anyone who wants to understand more about the difference between and relative demand of qualifications at different levels.

How should awarding organisations use the level descriptors?

- 4.4 Awarding organisations should look at the range of level descriptors and identify the descriptor (or where the qualification will have more than one level, the descriptors) which provides the best match with the intended knowledge and skills outcomes for their qualification. Once the awarding organisation has designed the qualification, they could look at the descriptor for the level above and below the proposed level for the qualification and compare the knowledge and skills descriptors for each level with the knowledge, skills and understanding which the holder of the qualification is expected to demonstrate. The fit does not have to be perfect; qualifications might naturally have a more knowledge- or skills-based focus and so will be a better fit with the knowledge or skills descriptor as appropriate.
- 4.5 Awarding organisations can also look at a range of other material to support the selection of the most appropriate level for their qualification including other

qualifications at a range of levels, benchmark and content statements and agreed industry statements.

- 4.6 Awarding organisations and users should not expect all qualifications to meet the relevant level descriptor in full. It would not be unusual for smaller qualifications to cover only some of the characteristics set out in the descriptor whereas bigger qualifications, typically taken over a longer period, are more likely to feature more of the characteristics. The descriptors set out what the typical holder of a qualification at that level will know and be able to do based on the best-fit approach described above.
- 4.7 Awarding organisations and users should not expect all of a qualification's content and assessment to be at the level the learner is expected to reach on conclusion of the qualification. This will be particularly true of qualifications delivered over a longer period and which are designed to enable the learner to progress from one level to another within the qualification. In assigning a level to a qualification the awarding organisation should have regard to the amount of content and assessment at the level of the qualification and to the learner's increased ability as the learner approaches the end of the qualification.

How will Ofqual use the descriptors?

- 4.8 We will use the descriptors to inform our review process, particularly when we are exploring how awarding organisations check and verify the given level of their qualification with these descriptors for that level.

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