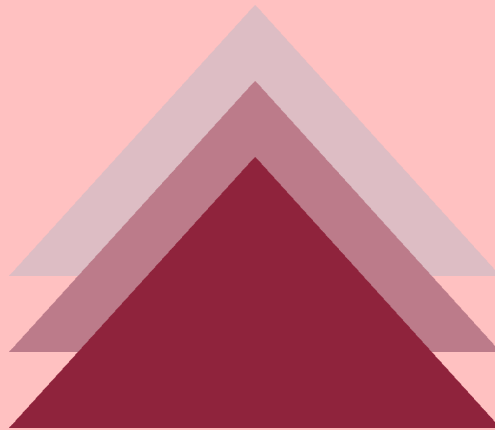


HOW TO USE LEVEL DESCRIPTORS



Jenny Moon



SOUTHERN ENGLAND CONSORTIUM FOR
CREDIT ACCUMULATION AND TRANSFER

Introduction to SEEC's 'How to' Series

This series is designed to offer practical advice to lecturers and course designers in higher education. They all address different aspects of operating a credit-based system but do not restrict themselves to issues directly relating to the award of credit. We shall be looking at a variety of matters which will be of particular relevance to the implementation of the Qualification Framework for Higher Education (QFHE), whilst not implying that the authors or SEEC endorse every aspect of the NQF.

All the authors in the series are from institutions that are members of SEEC and the topics have been chosen from workshops or meetings of the SEEC Networks which have proved to be popular and address participants' immediate concerns. As relatively short and practical guides to good practice the books are based on the experience of the authors, SEEC and relevant research findings. Whilst each publication will include a set of references and suggestions for further reading, they are not intended to be discussions of the research literature. Rather we hope to encapsulate in a relatively brief and simple format what staff will find most useful in their day-to-day work. Hence all the titles begin with the phrase 'How to ...' The first in the series focuses on learning outcomes and assessment criteria and this book, is in a sense, a sequel with a more detailed discussion of the use of level descriptors in course design. The series will include texts on the accreditation of prior and experiential learning AP(E)L, work-based learning and recognising international qualifications.

The series is published by SEEC, a consortium of institutions undertaking teaching at higher education level. Its aim is to promote the use of credit accumulation and transfer in order to improve accessibility and flexibility in HE. SEEC is the oldest and largest higher education consortium for credit accumulation and transfer (CATS) in the United Kingdom. Further information about SEEC and its publications can be obtained by consulting its web-site, www.seec-office.org.uk.

David Gosling (series editor)

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How to Use Level Descriptors

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Introduction

In a recent survey of higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 76% of the ninety-two higher education institutions that responded, claimed to be using level descriptors (Johnson and Walsh, 2000).

The major initial work on detailed level descriptors in the UK originated from two Department of Education and Employment (DfEE¹) credit development projects in the early to mid 1990s. The projects involved many higher education institutions in the south of England (Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer – SEEC) and Wales (Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales – HECIW). Between the two projects, around fifty higher education institutions were represented.

In these initial developments, level descriptors provided a structure for the use of credit in higher education. There were other associated developments at the time, among them the generation of guidelines for the use of learning outcomes (HECIW, 1996). As we shall be describing in this book, the system of learning outcomes written in association with level descriptors has become a common means of describing learning in higher education. The system can assist with communication of standards and it can also form an important basis for quality assurance procedures. The use of learning outcomes and assessment criteria is described in the first of this 'How to' series – 'How to Use Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria' (Gosling and Moon, 2001).

Other forms of level descriptors have been produced in recent years, many of them based on the original SEEC / HECIW descriptors. Indeed the descriptors presented in this booklet represent a format that improves on the original SEEC / HECIW descriptors both in its layout and in the use of two postgraduate levels instead of the original one.

This book is published a year after the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has issued the Qualifications Framework in Higher Education (QFHE) which provided another set of descriptors of levels of expected learning. The QFHE, in its final version, did not provide any guidance as to the volume of credit of qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This has given rise to the production of another relevant document – 'Credit and HE Qualifications – Credit Guidelines for HE Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland' (CQFW, NICATS, NUCCAT*, SEEC, 2001).

Definition

A range of terms is used in higher education to refer to 'elements' within a programme of study. In this book the term 'module' is used to refer to a separately assessed block of learning that earns credit when successfully completed. 'Programme' is used to refer to study or learning towards an award or qualification. Normally a programme is made up of a number of modules. In addition, the term 'course' is used to refer to a period of study that is generally short, complete in itself and not necessarily associated with usual higher education qualifications.

Aims of this publication

There are no 'correct' level descriptors, nor are there correct ways of using them or of writing learning outcomes. In all uses of level descriptors we are trying to create greater clarity for learners, teachers, administrators and others about their expectations of educational provision and of the processes of learning, teaching and assessment that are associated with that provision. The publication aims to provide guidelines to support and promote good practice.

While many have been suspicious of the introduction of level descriptors and learning outcomes, they will find, if they examine their practices, that they do use such concepts. Anyone who makes a judgement of assessed work in relation to the standards expected at different stages of a higher education programme is implicitly describing levels. The only difference is that their descriptors are not written down and they have probably not been subject to discussion or agreement with colleagues.

The author

Jenny Moon was involved in the development of level descriptors and learning outcomes as Development Project Officer in HECIW, in Wales in the mid 1990s. Later, in the context of learning support and education or staff development posts she had the opportunity to consider the roles of level descriptors and learning outcomes in the context of good practice in learning and teaching. She runs workshops at many higher education institutions on a variety of topics, including levels and learning outcomes as well as her current research topics of reflection, learning from experience and learning journals. She has published four books since 1999 with Kogan Page, the last being published in 2002 on module and programme structures. Jenny was a co-author of the first book in this SEEC series – ‘How to Write Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria’.

Some notes on word conventions for this book:

- The terms ‘learner’ and ‘student’ are used interchangeably and, the female personal pronoun is used throughout.
- General reference to levels in the text, are to the SEEC system of credit level descriptors – ie levels 1, 2, 3, Master’s and Taught Doctorate)

Part One: What are levels and level descriptors?

Levels

A programme in higher education used to be described in terms of years – thus we would talk of a student in her first, second or third (or may be fourth) year of an undergraduate programme. Generally the reference to years of study would convey the complexity of teaching, and the demands of learning and assessment that the learner would be experiencing. While the patterns of higher education were in their traditional form, this system was adequate. For example, there were relatively few students – well under ten percent of the population – and nearly all were full time. Those students did not tend to change between programmes, and teaching and learning was integrated and not modular.

Under these circumstances, we assumed that we knew what a second year student's work looked like. Whether or not we could have agreed on this in a precise manner might sometimes be debatable. When the matter of expectations of student achievement was addressed, we would rely largely on the interactions between teaching staff and external examiners to sort it out. Evidence of this approach to levels is demonstrated in the Council for National Academic Awards Handbook (CNAA, 1991) in which Level 2 achievement is simply described as 'Work equivalent to the standard required for the fulfilment of the general aims of the second year of a full-time degree'. Such a self-referential approach does not enable the development of an agreed concept of standards.

In recent years many things have changed. Student numbers have risen and there are more staff and fewer opportunities to discuss expectations of student work. Particularly important were a series of changes that could be associated with the development of credit accumulation and transfer systems (CATS). This system implied that learning should be made more 'portable' – so that a learner could gain credit for learning that had been achieved and potentially use that credit as part of an award in another institution or another situation. Partly as a result of the orientation of higher education towards a credit system, many programmes were redeveloped into a series of modules (modularisation).

A modularised and credit-based system along with the political pressures to widen access to higher education and to view it in the context of lifelong learning, brought about an increase in part time study and developments associated with the accreditation of short courses such as those in professional development. Further developments that make higher education more flexible and better adapted to the needs of a modern economy are the adoption of methods of accrediting learning in work-based situations (work-based learning) and that which has resulted from prior experience. When

the prior experience is certificated, the term 'accreditation of prior learning' (APL) is used, and where it is uncertificated, the term 'accreditation of prior experiential learning' (APEL) is used.

These changes required a move away from the traditional description of learning in terms of the year of study in an undergraduate programme to a system that could be applied more widely. The existence of part-time programmes meant that the demands of learning could no longer be realistically described in terms of the year as a student might be taking six years to reach an honours degree. Similarly APEL and the accreditation of work-based learning or short courses has made it important to be able to recognise where a body of learning 'fits' into the patterns of institution-based higher education. The 'fit' will relate to the content of the learning and its level. These ideas are expressed as learning outcomes associated with a specific level.

England and Wales have retained the notion that there are three levels of study in most undergraduate programmes and this applies even if there are, in total, four years (or more) of undergraduate study. In Scotland many undergraduate programmes take four years to reach honours degree level and in order to take account of this different tradition, four undergraduate Scottish levels are usually present in level descriptors.

Definition: a **level** is an indicator of relative demand; complexity; depth of study and learner autonomy (Gosling and Moon, 2001)

In terms of postgraduate education, different patterns of levels have been used in different systems. Until recently, the level descriptors in most general use relied on one level for all postgraduate provision (often called 'level M'). This level applied mainly to Masters programmes. However, with the increase in taught doctorates, it became important to recognise that Masters degrees do not represent the highest level of learning, and current descriptors now tend to split postgraduate provision into Masters and Taught Doctorate levels. Because most systems of level descriptors are concerned with learning that has been prescribed in a teaching / learning situation, level descriptors tend not to refer to research degrees (for example, PhD's). The QAA descriptors, however, are qualification descriptors and therefore do relate to research programmes (see below).

Levels are generally arranged in a hierarchy – so that a higher level is seen as more complex in terms of learning than a lower level and there is an assumption that levels higher in the hierarchy subsume the learning from lower levels. Thus someone entering a programme at Master's level would be expected to have attained learning described below Master's level. They will be expected to have attained an Honours degree or to demonstrate the achievement of learning equivalent to that standard. Generally numerical labels have been used for levels but the new system of qualification descriptors in the QAA Qualifications Framework introduces a series of letters – still arranged in a hierarchy. To confuse matters there are several systems of numbering of levels in operation at present as will be seen below. While some systems relate numbering only to higher education, starting at level 1 for the first level of undergraduate education, others have introduced systems that take into account stages of previous learning (eg post 16 or lower). Fig 1 demonstrates some of the different systems in operation.

A level is an indication of the relative difficulty or demand of the work and the relative ability of a student for successful achievement of the credit for the learning at that level. In the case of the QAA qualification descriptors, the levels relate to the standard of difficulty of the work that the learner will have demonstrated in order to gain the qualification. So, in this way, a student who gains a Foundation degree will have demonstrated her abilities at Intermediate level, the second of the three undergraduate qualification levels.

Level descriptors

The achievement of learning to be expected at each different level in a system is stated in terms of level descriptors.

Definition: Level descriptors are generic statements describing the characteristics and context of learning expected at each level against which learning outcomes and assessment criteria can be reviewed in order to develop modules and assign credit at the appropriate level (Gosling and Moon, 2001).

There are many different – but accepted ways of describing learning, so in different sets of descriptors there tend to be specific aspects of learning that are described. Sometimes this is because of an emphasis on different forms of learning in the qualification. For example, in the level descriptors used by the University for Industry (Ufi), there is more concern for the learning relevant to work places (Jackson, 1999). Most descriptors, however, focus on the complexity of knowledge / understanding; cognitive skills (such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and other skills (variably named transferable, key, employability skills – or similar terms). Sometimes there is a statement about the level of responsibility that a learner at a particular level might take in a work or professional situation or in terms of personal management. Often embedded among the descriptors, there will be a reference to the autonomy of the learner as a learner and / or the amount of guidance required for the learner with regard to her learning.

Most commonly in level descriptors, learning is described in terms of:

- complexity of knowledge and understanding;
- standard of cognitive skills;
- key or transferable skills achieved;
- the expected responsibility of the learner;
- the autonomy or independence of the learner;
- amount of guidance required by the learner.

Examples of level descriptors are provided in Appendices 1 and 2.

The relative standard of level descriptors

Another variation between the different sets of level descriptors is the standard of student learning within the individual levels. Descriptors may be cast in terms of aspiration (what we hope best students will achieve), in terms of the expectation of the typical student or they might indicate what students must achieve in order to have reached the standard implied by the level (ie threshold standard). However, there is great difficulty in 'fine-tuning' language sufficiently to differentiate these standards within generic descriptors. When descriptors are subject-specific, the matter becomes easier.

Definition: Threshold, in this context, means the declaration of a standard that the student must achieve in order to pass. In other words it describes essential learning or the minimum acceptable quality of learning.

As a consequence of the difficulty of differentiating standards within levels, the SEEC descriptors (Appendix 1) do not attempt to identify relative standards within a level, but are described as providing 'guidance' to expected achievement at each level. In terms of relating level descriptors to standards of achievement in higher education, this system is appropriate so long as learning outcomes, which relate modules to level descriptors, are written at threshold – or in terms of what the learners must do to pass the module. In other words, we look for precision within a level in the statements of the learning outcomes.

A similar issue emerges where the observation is made that bright students – say at level 2 – function at the same 'level' as poorer students at level 3. Similarly poorer students at level 2 may be functioning in the same manner as bright level 1 students. While these situations may be arising, we should not lose account of the fact that these students are being assessed on learning outcomes at level 2 – and therefore cannot gain credit at other than level 2. Within the levels system, they are seen as only functioning within the range of the one level, however, marking scales can differentiate standards of performance within that range.

Hint for good practice.

When using level descriptors, check whether they refer to the average student, what the best students will achieve or what all students must achieve – or do they – perhaps more realistically – provide 'guidance' to achievement?

Examples of the main types of level descriptors

Credit level and similar descriptors that operate for components of a programme (eg modules)

The **SEEC descriptors** had their origins around seven years ago in a joint development of levels between two DfEE-funded credit development projects – SEEC and HECIW. These descriptors were later modified to the current SEEC credit level descriptors. Thus the original descriptors have been at the root of most subsequent developments (Appendix 1).

There are two versions of the **NICATS descriptors** – a brief version and a more detailed version (NICATS 1998). The brief descriptors were adopted in a later DfEE project when higher education credit agencies across the UK were working towards the development of a common UK credit framework (Inter-Consortium Credit Agreement – InCCA project). They are also used in the Credit Guidelines for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (COFW, NICATS, NUCCAT and SEEC, 2001). One of the main advantages of the NICATS descriptors is that they use nine levels that start at post-16 provision as level 1. Higher education provision is at levels 4 – 8 (inclusive). The incorporation of levels below higher education levels facilitates the development of a 'seamless' educational progression.

The **University for Industry** level descriptors (Jackson, 1999) are similar to the NICATS descriptors in running from entry level through levels 1 to 8, with levels 4 to 8 (inclusively) representing the higher education levels. These descriptors have been specifically designed for use of learners in the context of work situations.

Somewhat different from the descriptors above are a set of general descriptors that have been developed by the **Qualifications and Curriculum Agency** (QCA) to provide general descriptions for National Vocational Qualification levels. These are sometimes used in higher education for vocational subject areas. They start prior to GCSE level and progress to level 5. Levels 4 and 5 are generally agreed to be relevant to higher education – representing the competence achieved in undergraduate and postgraduate levels respectively.

Qualification descriptors

The **QAA Qualification descriptors** (Appendix 2) provide some structure for the Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (QFHE). They 'exemplify the outcomes of the main qualification at each level and demonstrate the nature of change between levels' (p.5 in QAA, 2001). The descriptors are presented in two parts at each level. The first part is worded as 'a statement of outcomes, achievement of which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification'(p 5). This implies that the standard of these descriptors is at threshold. The second part is a statement of 'the wider abilities that the typical student should be expected to have developed' (p 5). The reference to the 'typical student' suggests that this part of the descriptors is designed to act more like a guide to standards – as the SEEC credit level descriptors. While these descriptors may not actually be called 'level' descriptors, they largely conform to the definitions of level descriptors, serve many of the same purposes and are likely to be used similarly.

The first part of the Qualification descriptors is intended for an audience of those who design, approve and review academic programmes and the second part is for a wider audience of those not directly associated with higher education, such as employers.

The qualifications descriptors relate to three undergraduate levels – certificate, intermediate and honours (C, I and H), and two postgraduate levels – Masters and Doctorate (M and D).

Definition: QAA Qualification descriptors 'exemplify the outcomes of the main qualification at each level and demonstrate the nature of change between the levels' and state 'the wider abilities that the typical student should be expected to have developed' at each level' (QAA, 2001, p5)

The difference between credit level descriptors and qualification descriptors

Many practitioners will not recognise the conceptual difference in intended uses for credit level descriptors and qualification descriptors, but there is a subtle difference. Qualification descriptors describe the learning that students should have achieved at the end point (i.e. level) of that qualification. Thus the learning achievements to be reached at the award of a Master's degree are described by the Master's descriptors.

The QFHE descriptors would suffice (with some limitations – see later) if students only studied modules at each level that were associated with that level – if, for example, Master's students only studied Master's level modules – but this may not be the case. Even the end point of a qualification may consist of a mix of modules from several levels. For this reason, in addition to the qualification descriptors, we need a set of descriptors that relate to the actual level of modules themselves. Credit level descriptors can perform this function.

A possible source of confusion arises because, on the one hand, QAA says that qualification descriptors 'exemplify the outcomes of the main qualification at each level' (QAA, 2001, p.5), but, on the other hand, that they describe 'outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications'. This potential confusion exists particularly at the 'intermediate level' where the single set of qualification descriptors attempt to describe the outcomes for a range of qualifications that are substantially different. These include Undergraduate Diplomas, Foundation Degrees and many Higher National Diplomas, and also Ordinary Degrees. QAA appears to recognise this anomaly in the suggestion that benchmark statements may be developed to provide 'additional qualification descriptors'.

Appendix 3 provides a comparison of the levels implied by the QAA qualification descriptors and the SEEC credit level descriptors. The contents of the appendix is relevant to both this section and to later sections on choosing and using level descriptors.

Comparison and articulation in different systems of level descriptors

It is ironic that the various attempts to produce agreements about the various structures to represent learning outcomes in higher education (and at other levels, too) over the last eight or so years have resulted in greater diversity of structures rather than a unified system. There is not a single qualification framework in the United Kingdom. Rather, we have different structures being used by QCA and QAA, and different levels and level descriptors being used in each of the regional credit schemes (SEEC, NICATS, Wales and Scotland).

Some aspects of this diversity can be turned to advantage to support what is meant to be a more diverse higher education – however, some are apt to produce confusion. Fig 1 is a table of various systems of descriptors, showing the different terms used for level and the different numbers of levels utilised. No formal method of comparing levels between the systems has been agreed, but broad generalisations about comparisons can be made.

Fig 1 A comparison of some different systems of level descriptors in the UK. The table makes broad generalisations. Most of the systems have not undergone formal comparison.

Levels	SEEC	QAA QFHE	NICATS InCCA	QCA	Wales	SCOTLAND **	
						SHE	SCQF
Pre-higher education (HE) levels	Level Zero*	n/a	Entry level plus levels 1-3	Levels 1-3	n/a	n/a	levels 1-6
First HE level	Level 1	Level C	Level 4	Level 4	Level 1	SHE1	Level 7
Second HE level	Level 2	Level I	Level 5		Level 2	SHE2	Level 8
Third HE level	Level 3	Level H	Level 6		Level 3	SHE3	Level 9
First postgraduate level	Master's level	Level M	Level 7		Master's level	M	
Second postgraduate level	Taught Doctorate level	Level D	Level 8	Level 5	Taught Doctorate level	D	

* A 'Level Zero' is not formally part of the SEEC level descriptors, but has been used by a number of SEEC institutions

** SHE = Scottish higher education level; SCQF = Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (QAA, 2001a)

Since no formal agreements of articulation between these various level descriptors have been made, there are difficulties when students apply for admission with credit-bearing qualifications that are based on different systems of levels than those in use in the receiving university. This might arise, for example, with transfers between Scotland and England but it could pose problems for transfers in Europe or overseas (see below).

Similarly there can also be difficulties in the articulation of levels for students moving from one programme to another. For example there has been ambiguity in the attribution of level to some Higher National Diplomas (HND's) which have been associated with the top further education levels and levels 1 and 2 in higher education. HND's may be regarded as levels 0* and 1 or levels 1 and 2 in higher education. An anomaly is that what actually may define their level is not the actual level of the learning but the amount of extra learning such students will need to do to reach the level of an Honours Bachelor's degree.

There are also difficulties when students move from one system to another – for example, when a Scottish student from a system with four undergraduate levels, moves to an English HEI that uses the three- undergraduate level system – or when international transfers are involved. However, compounding these situations are likely to be other matters of matching the content of the programmes. The process of matching content will take into account, but may subsume the concerns about mismatch of levels. We consider the practical side of this in Part Three.

Levels outside the UK

A few countries have systems of levels which may or may not be useful when those students come to Britain or vice versa. Examples are Australia and New Zealand. However this is unusual and the European Credit Transfer System explicitly does not involve description of levels because it works across such a range of different shapes and structures of higher education. Generally speaking European higher education works on a curriculum model - which is based on the notion of volume of learning identified in terms of years of study. The Bologna Declaration may change this. There is an attempt in the Declaration to harmonise higher education in Europe to a three or four first cycle of qualifications (undergraduate) and a two year cycle of postgraduate qualifications. With more unity according to programme length, it may be possible to consider description of levels, in which case, those involved in work on levels in the UK may be able to provide valuable support during development work.

When students from Europe or overseas want to study towards further qualifications in the UK and they have some part or full qualifications, the usual procedure is to seek guidance from established reference sources that match non-UK awards to UK higher education awards. Examples of such sources are the British Council International Guide to Qualifications in Education (4th Edition) – commonly known as the NARIC Guide (National Academic Recognition Information Centre Guide). This is available on CD or, for European qualifications, on the Eurydice web site ([Http://www.eurydice.org](http://www.eurydice.org)).

Part Two: Levels and level descriptors

Why have levels and level descriptors?

A set of level descriptors provides a reference point for maintenance and determination of standards

A set of level descriptors can be regarded as a reference point that may facilitate the maintenance of standards. The maintenance of standards in higher education concerns many variables, of which levels are one.

Hint for good practice.

Level descriptors may facilitate the comparison between:

- subject programmes in different institutions.
- subject programmes in the same institution.
- where necessary, between providers in different countries.

Levels and level descriptors provide a structure to higher education, based on anticipated and achieved learning

The use of level descriptors along with learning outcomes puts the focus on learning. The fact that level descriptors are described in terms of learning represents a subtle, but highly significant change in the view of higher education. No longer is the focus on a concern with the complexity of input (teaching), but it is on the complexity of output – what the student can do as a result of study at a particular level.

Level descriptors provide a structure to higher education by giving a more practical meaning to progression in learning. It is most usual for students to complete a batch of modules at one level before proceeding to modules at the next level but there can be exceptions to this as was suggested in the discussion of the role of qualification descriptors. While it is possible for students to be studying modules that relate to two (or occasionally more) different levels at the same time (depending on institutional regulations), the use of a system of levels provides a structure for general progression. In this way it is ensured that less challenging learning is the foundation for tackling more challenging learning. Such a structure can be of greater importance in non-traditional programmes – such as those that are work-based, part time, multidisciplinary, those that involve negotiated learning and so on. Levels also provide a structure for the accreditation of prior accredited and experiential learning.

Hint for good practice.

The use of an agreed set of level descriptors can provide a unified reference point for progression and standards.

Levels, programme specification and benchmarks

Subject benchmarks and programme specifications are part of the new language of the structure of programmes in higher education (www.qaa.ac.uk). In this section we consider their relationship to levels and level descriptors. Benchmark statements can be regarded as another reference point for standards. There are 42 subject benchmark groups that have been developing statements to indicate what students might be expected to achieve in their learning at Honours standard (level 3) in a subject related programme. The benchmarks are now largely published and most have presented the benchmarks at least at threshold and for excellent students – though actually what standard constitutes ‘threshold’ has been subject to different interpretations. There is also considerable variability in the nature of the benchmarks for the different subject areas (Moon, 1999).

Hint for good practice.

We have indicated that a set of level descriptors is a reference point for standards of provision in higher education. Other reference points are professional, vocational and subject body expectations or requirements, comparison with programmes in other similar institutions (via the external examiner system) and subject benchmarks.

In terms of their relationship to level descriptors, benchmark statements are at level 3 (or level H – in qualification descriptor terms) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland since they represent the achievements of Honours degree students. The exercise of translating level descriptors into the discourse of a subject, discipline or programme at level 3 (Part Three, below) can yield material similar to some benchmarks.

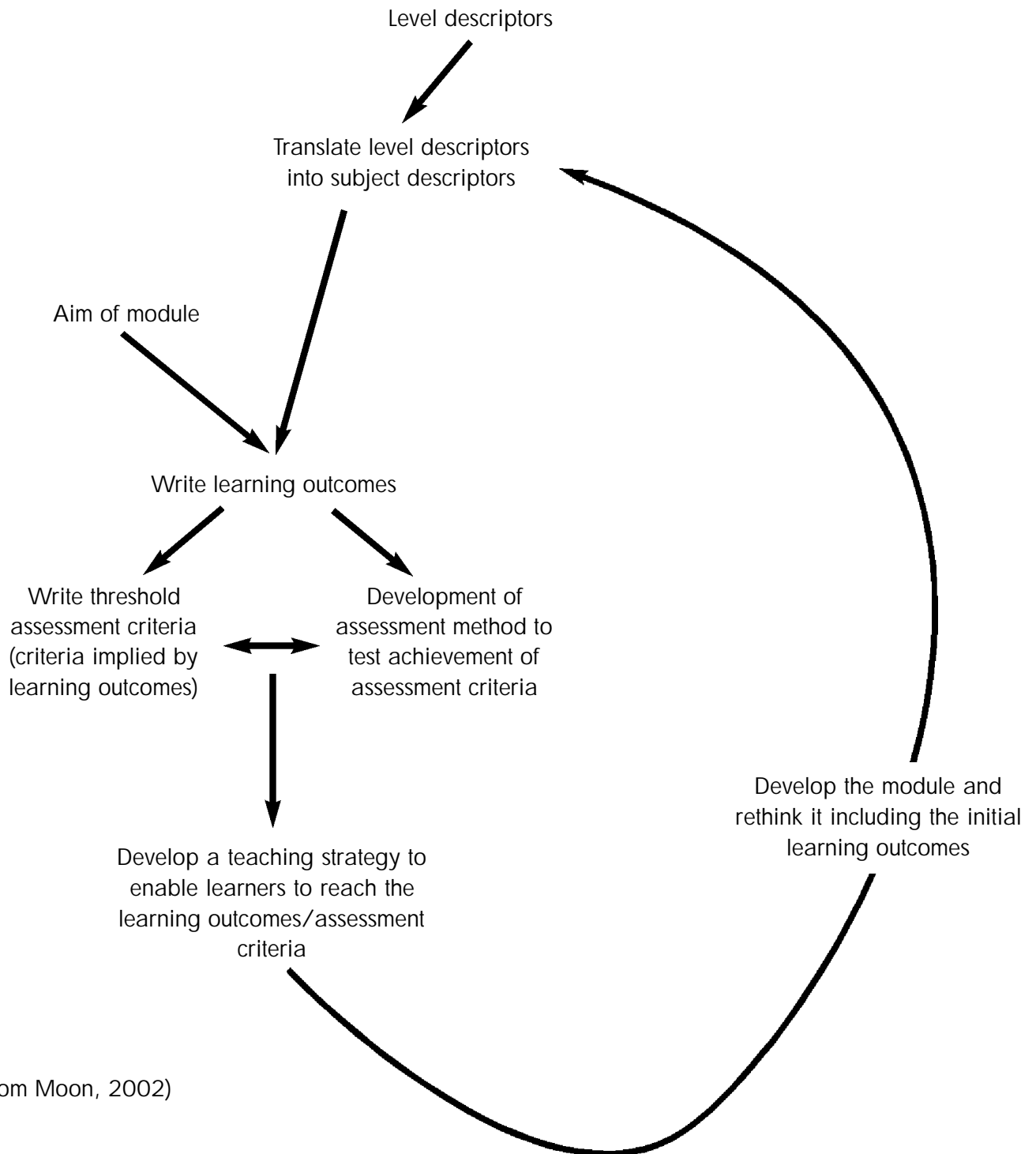
Programme specifications provide guidelines for a format in which to describe programmes in higher education. These are required in internal or external processes of monitoring and review. There are four ways in which levels are relevant to programme specification. Firstly, institutions are asked to supply detail of the level that is the end point of the particular programme. Since the programme specification is written at programme level, the qualification descriptors are likely to be used here. Secondly there is a requirement to describe the programme in terms of ‘programme outcomes’. The latter are descriptions of the learning that is expected to be achieved at the end of the programme by the typical student. They are not set at threshold - unlike learning outcomes for modules. Programme outcomes are likely to take account of reference points (see above) that will include level descriptors.

The third point is that level descriptors are likely to have a greater role in the development of programme outcomes in multidisciplinary or non traditional programmes where there is not a set of benchmark statements, subject body or similar programme expectations to which to refer (see Part Three where this is covered in more detail). The fourth way in which level descriptors impinge on the construction of programme specification is in the section that describes the modules that constitute the programme – with details of level of the modules.

Level descriptors support the development of modules

Not only do levels and level descriptors provide a structure for higher education across programmes, but also they structure curricula within programmes. The ‘Map of module development’ (Fig 2) below indicates the role of level descriptors in module design and development.

Fig 2 Map of module development



(from Moon, 2002)

Level descriptors can play a central role in the process of module development through the manner in which they guide the writing of learning outcomes (in conjunction with the aim of the module). A set of level descriptors may act directly as a guide for the writing of learning outcomes or the level descriptors may be translated into descriptors for the discipline or programme (see Part Three). In either case, the level descriptors ensure that the outcome statement is clearly related to a particular level and they provide an indication of agreed achievements. Learners must show that they can achieve the learning outcomes to gain credit for the module. Aims provide a rationale or a direction for the module (Gosling and Moon, 2001)

Learning outcomes in turn imply the assessment criteria. Assessment criteria may be developed from the learning outcome or from the assessment method or task – but in either case they should relate to

the learning outcome. There are many reasons for developing assessment tasks and these will affect the manner in which an assessment task is designed. However, the central purpose of the task with which we are concerned here is to test that the learning outcomes have been achieved. A teaching strategy, on this model, is seen as being designed in relation to assessment processes, providing the support necessary to enable the students to be successful in attaining the threshold indicated in assessment criteria (Moon, 2002).

The map above is not just for development processes. It also serves to guide a check on coherence and consistency of the elements within the module. This means going through the cycle perhaps several times, ensuring that each part that is linked to another part in terms of the structure of the module. Any element in the cycle of development can be changed except the agreed level descriptors.

Levels and level descriptors create transparency, and transparency reveals discrepancies

The use of a system of level descriptors creates transparency in higher education. Along with learning outcomes and assessment criteria, the use of level descriptors helps to make higher education practice more explicit. Such thinking is not new and the development of level descriptors may have done no more than to put on paper the ideas that were always in the minds of the more concerned teachers. Anyone who has ever engaged in the kind of conversation that compared the work of one years group of students with that of another, has thought in terms of levels and the related expectations of achievement.

Greater transparency reveals discrepancies. When a system becomes more transparent inconsistencies tend to be unearthed. In addition to demonstrating anomalies in standards within, across and between institutions, the introduction of a levels structure reveals specific issues.

Examples of discrepancies that may be indicated by level descriptors

- The Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) is postgraduate in terms of when a student studies for it – after graduation from a first degree. However, the actual demands of the learning involved may not match the Master's level descriptors. One way of dealing with the situation is to distinguish between programmes that are **postgraduate in time** and those that are **postgraduate in level** and to recognise that new learning does not require to be pitched at or above the level of learning already achieved by the learner. This is an issue addressed by the use of qualification descriptors in the QFHE
- Another form of discrepancy revealed by attention to level is the anomaly of **modules offered at two different levels**. It has not been unusual, for example, for students at level 2, to be offered the same modules with the same learning outcomes and assessment at level 2 or level 3, with the level of award of credit depending on the level of the student. Use of a levels system requires modules, their learning outcomes and their assessment criteria to be identified with one level depending on the learning challenge of the learning.
- **Ab initio learning** can pose a problem. Within a Master's programme, a student might study a completely new language – (eg classical languages in a theology Master's). Could a completely new subject be addressed directly at Master's level? One way round this is to argue that Master's level learners will achieve the learning outcomes more proficiently because they can function at Master's level. Another is to allow, in the level of a qualification, for a certain number of credits to be studied at a lower level – so at Master's it may be appropriate for 30 credits to be achieved at lower than Master's level.

Level descriptors are a means of communication about higher education

In their work on the development of the Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, QAA reported that many employers and others outside higher education do not understand qualifications in higher education and what they should expect of students at different levels. One reason behind the development of the descriptors associated with QFHE was for communication – though other descriptors will perform similarly. Sometimes simplification of the ‘education language’ can be helpful (see below – on using level descriptors with students).

Hint for good practice.

Think of level descriptors as a means of communication about expectations of study for:

- staff in the same subject area.
- staff in different disciplines.
- staff in the same discipline in different institutions.
- staff and students.
- staff and students and future employers.
- staff and others outside HE who might provide or make use of short courses - and so on.

The precision of the instrument

We need to recognise the sheer difficulty of making words describe the subtlety of our expectations of student work – putting on paper the ‘I know good work when I see it’ feeling. Words are blunt instruments and the conception of learning is slippery and complex. The construction of level descriptors is a matter of doing the best possible job in the circumstances. Level descriptors should, not, therefore, be regarded rigidly but as developmental (we may be able to improve on what has been developed) and in the nature of guides rather than dictates. However, it is worth noting that the ‘bluntness’ of level descriptors in their generic form can be improved considerably by ‘translating’ them into a the discourse of a discipline or a programme (see Part Three).

Part Three: Using level descriptors

In Section One we looked at the nature and definition of Level Descriptors and in Section Two we saw why levels and level descriptors are used. Whilst recognising that level descriptors are relatively 'blunt instruments' to describe the complexity of the learning that is generated within any course, they have a clear function and value. So when are we most likely to need to refer to level descriptors?

When to use level descriptors

- when designing new programmes of study
- when writing learning outcomes
- when writing assessment criteria
- when assessing prior learning
- when incorporating non-traditional learning (e.g. work-based learning) into award-bearing courses
- when modules, or short courses, from outside the HE system need to be related to HE for accreditation purposes
- when learning at different levels needs to be compared

Choosing descriptors

It is likely that in any kind of QAA review or monitoring process, personnel involved will have been 'trained' in the use of the qualification descriptors as part of their work on the QFHE. On this basis, it is clearly sensible for an institution to use qualification descriptors when there is reference to qualifications.

Hint for good practice.

It is useful for institutions to use the qualification descriptors because they have been developed by QAA as part of the QFHE. Qualification descriptors relate only to whole qualifications and institutions are likely to find it useful to use a set of level descriptors (eg SEEC descriptors) for other purposes that do not directly relate to whole qualifications – but to, for example, modules.

However, qualification descriptors do not describe the chunks of learning which go into making a qualification. We need a second set of descriptors when working at anything that is not a whole qualification, for example, in **developing or validating modules**. Even if the module is at the same level as an award, the qualification descriptors are relatively brief and provide insufficient information for the development of a module. They also do not include systematic information about the role of skills in learning.

Course designers are faced with a choice about which level descriptors to use or which to use in combination with each other when they are designing modules. How should we decide? Some of the issues are set out below.

Choosing which descriptors to use: questions to ask yourself

- What is the structure of local higher education? Are there local descriptors in use? E.g three undergraduate levels in England (SEEC), four undergraduate levels in Scotland (SCOTCAT) or nine all through levels (NICATS).
- What is the nature of the learning? Work-based learning, for example, may be better described by the University for Industry descriptors (Jackson, 1999).
- What sort of layout of descriptors would be useful? Are these descriptors, for example, going to be customised to a particular programme / discipline etc?
- Is it important to use descriptors with skills specifically mentioned? (as in the SEEC descriptors)
- Are there issues of articulation that are important – between FE and HE, for example?
- Is terminology for levels an issue? The terminology that is most common seems to be HE1, 2 and 3, Masters and Taught Doctorate.

A detailed comparison between the SEEC and the QFHE descriptors has been undertaken and concluded that the two systems of descriptors are relatively similar in their implications of level and could therefore be used in tandem (Appendix 3; Moon, 2001a).

How to work with level descriptors

There are some general guidelines for using level descriptors:

1. Level descriptors should be seen as helpful guides rather than dictates.
2. They are generic and may, therefore, contain sections that are not appropriate to a particular programme. It is reasonable, then to ignore or remove the section. For example, communication skills in level descriptors may not be developed in all modules.
3. Descriptors do not cover all possible learning that is relevant in a programme of study. There may be other types of learning that apply to a particular programme, and in which progression is demonstrable. These may be usefully added to the descriptors. One way of doing this in the SEEC descriptors is to elaborate the detail of the 'practical skills'. For example, graphic skills may be central to some programmes but is not specified in the generic descriptors.

4. In working with descriptors at a particular level in a programme look at equivalent descriptors for the previous and the next level. Descriptors work better when viewed in the context of progression – the words become more meaningful.
5. Look at the relationship between descriptors at the same level. Most learning described in level descriptors do not function independently of each other. For example, the ability to analyse at a particular level is meaningless in terms of level unless the complexity of the material of learning is taken into account. A child of five can analyse – what differs from analysis at level 2 is not just the analytical skill, but also the complexity of the material (knowledge and understanding) that the learner is analysing.
6. Use level descriptors to provide an appropriate vocabulary to describe learning. This can be useful in any form of description of a programme, in writing learning outcomes, programme outcomes and so on.

Reflecting level in learning outcomes

There are no exact rules as to how to indicate level in learning outcomes. Often the level is implied in the type of activity that the learner must do in order to demonstrate that the learning has been attained. Sometimes there are other words that describe the performance. Sometimes, particularly in the sciences, the sequence of the subject material is so well established and / or logical that the level is implied by the complexity of subject matter described. Since learning outcomes imply assessment criteria, we should be able to assume a relationship between the assessment criteria and level (Gosling and Moon, 2001). We have previously mentioned the idea of customising level descriptors to a particular programme. This process will facilitate the matching development of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that accord with level descriptors (see below).

There follow some examples of learning outcomes (from Moon, 2002) with comments below each on how the level is generally reflected in the learning outcome.

Reflecting level in learning outcomes – some examples

Level 2 B.Ed programme

At the end of the module the learner is expected to be able to — explain the more common reasons for difficult behaviour in primary school children in class situations, indicating standard techniques for ameliorating that behaviour.

Comment: the implications of level reside in the nature of the learning, the notion of 'explain', the fact that it is 'the more common reasons' that they should address, and the fact also that it is 'the more standard techniques' that they address. These ideas accord generally and more specifically with level descriptors at level 2.

Level 3 English Literature

At the end of the module, the learner is expected to be able to - demonstrate detailed understanding of the influences of the historical and social context within which the chosen text is set, both from the study of the text itself and from the study of other contemporary literature.

Comment: the understanding required should be detailed and broader knowledge is sought than that from the text. These demands accord with level 3 expectations.

Master's level – Social Policy

At the end of the module, learners will be expected to be able to describe the historical development of social policy and judge the value of key developments in health care from the perspective of social policy.

Comment: in addition to assuming understanding of social policy and health care, the learners, the learners are expected to make judgements.

Level 1 Introduction to Chemistry module

At the end of the module, it is intended that the student will be able to write a concise, clear and tidy report of a laboratory practical that must be laid out in the prescribed format.

Comment: learners here are expected to learn basic presentation skills of writing, reporting clearly and working in a pre-determined format. It is a predictable and well-guided task that would be related to laboratory practicals at level 1.

Level 3 Physics learning outcome

At the end of the module the learner is expected to be able to - describe and explain the function of the basic devices of optoelectronics; optical fibres; liquid crystal displays; bi-polar and surface field effect transistors and MOS light emitting diodes.

Comment: level is represented here in the subject matter of the learning outcome.

It is worth noting that the discussion in this section can also apply to programme outcomes in programme specification documents. In this case the relevant level would either come from the qualification descriptor or from the relevant exit level in the credit level descriptors.

Using a system of level descriptors provides structure for accreditation of learning

There are often situations in higher education where an institution needs to accredit learning from sources external to the higher education system. Usually the purpose will be to relate the outside learning to the standards of the institution's own provision or higher education in general. One example of such a situation is when learners present prior learning or of prior experiential learning (APL or APEL) learning in the anticipation of gaining credit towards an award in the institution. The receiving institution will consider the incoming learning in terms of how it relates to that learning required for the attainment of the award. This matching process will usually be a matter of translating the presented learning into learning outcome statements at particular levels and ensuring that there is evidence that the learning has been achieved. The nature of the learning (eg in content) can then be compared with what is required on for the award in question. The determination of the learning outcomes will usually be done by the learner, herself, under guidance. She will need to learn to work with learning outcomes and level descriptors in the manner described in the section above. A fuller description of this process is provided in Wailey, 2002.

Level descriptors may also be used where there is accreditation of learning for a programme or award in an external situation – such as work or placement learning. The learner may need to

negotiate the nature of learning that will be awarded credit at a particular level. The situation will be similar to that described above except that the accreditation of the learning will be concurrent (the identification of what the learner will need to do rather than consideration of learning already done).

In another type of situation, providers of a short course developed outside higher education might find it useful to have the course accredited as a higher education award or as higher education credit. Learners who attain the award might then want to present it in an APL claim and use it towards another (greater) award or qualification. In such situations, level descriptors may be used to communicate with providers the level of difficulty of learning that will be required in order to accredit the course at a particular level, or they may be used to ascertain the level at which the course will be accredited.

An anomaly in the use of level descriptors with short course learning

A difficulty with accrediting learning from outside the higher education system is that the learning may have been acquired in 'small chunks' or 'bite-size learning'. Levels describe what is expected to have been achieved by learners at the end of a level in higher education and 'small chunks' might notionally fall into the gap between one level and another. For example, a short course (eg of two weeks duration) might be delivered to students who have just completed level 2 work – while an honours degree student's achievement is matched against the same level 3 descriptors when she has spent 25 weeks studying at that level. Such a situation supports the argument for treating level descriptors as guides, rather than precise measuring tools. It is a matter of 'best match'.

Articulation with other systems

We have already mentioned the difficulties of articulating levels with those from other systems of levels within the UK (Fig 1). We have also mentioned that outside the UK, there are few uses of levels that bear any relation to those within the UK.

Hint for good practice.

The following are some ways of dealing with articulation:

- Develop codes of practice for dealing with articulation issues with specific qualifications.
- Use the qualification descriptors.
- Refer to guides on qualifications in other countries and their equivalence in the UK.
- Use the procedures of the accreditation of prior learning (certificated or experiential) as a means of establishing level and point of entry for a new programme.

Translating level descriptors into programme / subject discourse

Several times we have suggested that level descriptors need to be translated into the discourse of the discipline or subject. The SEEC credit level descriptors are particularly suitable for this exercise because of the systematic layout that they provide.

How to do the translation exercise

- Step one: divide the team (if it is large enough) into groups of no more than six people.
- Step two: decide the level to be worked on. (Note: the exercise works best when staff examine all the levels of a programme of study, but start by thinking about the level of attainment to be achieved when the qualification is awarded).
- Step three: consider carefully the chosen level descriptors and note words that are generic and need translating (e.g. 'analyse abstract data', 'select and manage information').
- Step four: translate these generic terms into subject specific language – What kind of data? What sort of information? What type of selection? (the subject benchmarking statement may be helpful for working on the honours level)
- Step five: each group prepares a draft which is circulated to all.
- Step six: the whole group works on improving the precision of the words and ensuring that there is coherence across the descriptors for each level.
- Step seven: agree a set of level descriptors for the subject/programme of study

When staff undertake this exercise they need to recognise that not all of the descriptors will necessarily be relevant to their programme. Equally it is possible that capacities or skills that are not represented in the generic descriptors are important in the programme and can be added.

In doing this exercise, staff will not only be learning about level and learning how colleagues think about level, but they will also be developing an important document for future reference in monitoring or review situations – or as a basis for the development of other modules. Sometimes the language used will look somewhat like subject benchmarks (see earlier).

Hint for good practice.

The translation of the areas of knowledge and understanding represent a more difficult task than those of skills. Where a small group is working on all of the descriptors, skill areas are better tackled first.

An example of level descriptors 'translated' into the discourse of a programme is presented below. The material is based on an exercise done with staff of a department of education who were considering the level of an M.Ed programme. The staff group was working with SEEC level descriptors.

Extract from some 'translated' level descriptors for an M.Ed programme at a particular UK HE institution

Masters Level – M.Ed at the University of Jaytown

Development of knowledge and understanding

The learner

- **Knowledge base:** has depth and systematic understanding of knowledge in specialised / applied areas and / across areas of education and can work with theoretical / research-based knowledge in education and relevant areas of other disciplines.
- **Ethical issues:** has the awareness and ability to manage the ethical dilemmas which impinge directly upon home, school and classroom practices. Identifies dilemmas, negotiates solutions in partnership with others in the community.
- **Disciplinary methodologies:** has a comprehensive understanding of techniques / methodologies applicable to educational practice at a senior level (theory or research-based).

Cognitive and intellectual skills

The learner

- **Analysis:** with critical awareness can undertake analysis of complex, incomplete or contradictory areas of knowledge, which influence future professional knowledge and reflection.
- **Synthesis:** with critical awareness, can undertake synthesis of information in response to problems in advanced areas of pedagogical functioning. This may involve development of innovative approaches in new situations.
- **Evaluation:** can evaluate / argue alternative approaches. Can accurately and with justification assess or report on own or others' work and set targets for future personal or professional development.
- **Application:** can demonstrate initiative and originality in problem solving in educational situations. Can act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level, making decisions in complex and unpredictable situations

Using level descriptors as a tool for mapping skills and other curriculum components

Sets of level descriptors, such as the SEEC descriptors, make reference to many skills and other desirable components in higher education programmes. While it is not necessary for a programme to represent every area of level descriptors, the generic layout of the range of expected student learning, that is common in most programmes, can provide the basis for mapping the content of skills or other components within a programme at each level. It may be helpful to use the blank template for such an exercise.

Making use of level descriptors used as indicators of standards in multidisciplinary or non-traditional programmes

Multidisciplinary or non-traditional programmes (eg work-based programmes) provide an example of a particular application of level descriptors. Such programmes may not have the usual reference points for quality that is available for more traditional programmes as we have suggested earlier. Demonstration that the learning relates to appropriate levels may therefore be an important indicator of standards. Such a quality indicator is more useful if level descriptors are translated into words that relate to the actual programme as in the exercise above. It may be possible to make this a part of the student's work on the course. Such an exercise can contribute strongly to personal development planning and related reflective activities.

When working with multidisciplinary programmes it is not only the levels of individual modules that must be considered. The outcomes from the whole programme also needs to be taken into account, because students' total learning experience is more than 'the sum of its parts' (Moon, 2000). It is reasonable to ask such a question of many other modular programmes - even those that are in a named discipline or field. The question of coherence is due more attention than tends to be paid to it.

Level descriptors used as a marking guide or a framework for assessment

Levels and level descriptors can be used to structure and compile a framework for assessment or a marking guide. Before starting out on this venture, it is important to check the standard at which the chosen set of level descriptors operates (see Part Two). We have indicated that level descriptors may relate to threshold standards, average / typical or possibly excellent students – or, like the SEEC descriptors, they represent a 'guide' to achievement. Another decision is whether to generate an unstructured description of achievement (eg relating generally to knowledge, complexity of knowledge, cognitive skills, practical skills etc) or whether to choose several categories (eg knowledge of content; intellectual skills, ability to present response in an appropriate format) etc. These would become part of the structure – in essence rather general grading assessment criteria. The layout would usually be as below for each grade (Fig 3)

Fig 3 Examples of a description of achievement related to grades for level 1

Grade (by degree classification, A, B, C etc, or by mark or percentage etc). Eg	Criteria in columns or descriptions of achievement
85%+	Eg of general description of achievement – Exceptional work well beyond the quality expected for this level. Theoretical concepts are well grasped, and very effectively used in the execution of the assessed activity. There is evidence of considerable reading and reflection beyond the lecture material etc.
70 – 84%	Eg of general description of achievement – Work that is better than expected and well above average. Concepts are grasped competently and are well used in the execution of the assessed activity. There is evidence of reading and reflection well beyond the lecture material etc.
60 – 69% and so on	

Using level descriptors as a tool for staff development

When staff work with level descriptors, they are likely to engage in new conversations about their expectations of the learners in their modules or on their programme. Such conversations are particularly useful at the stage of developing a new programme or where customarily staff do not spend time with each other talking about learners and learning. One of the best ways to encourage such engagement is to ask a group of staff on a programme, or from a similar subject area to translate levels represented in their programme into the discourse of their programme (see above). Working in this way implies discussion of such educational words as 'analysis' in their programme / subject area; or how particular skills (eg presentation skills) feature and whether or not they should be present.

One of the challenges of introducing level descriptors to staff is to help staff to 'get a feel for the meanings' of the descriptors. Until there is a good reason for such engagement with descriptors, there is often a tendency to work with them superficially. In a vicious circle, not having 'a feel' for descriptors' is a reason for not using descriptors at a later stage when their use might be necessary. Below is a set of exercises that can be used in staff development sessions to focus on the meaning of the descriptors and also, this time as a by-product, to produce documents that have a value *per se*

Using level descriptors for staff development purposes: some exercises

- Compare SEEC credit level descriptors with QFHE. What differences are there in level? What are the implications of the differences given the different purposes for which the descriptors were developed?
- Go through a set of credit level descriptors and extract words that you feel require some further explanation. Work towards an agreed meaning of these words and compile a glossary. Bear in mind as you write the definitions, that they must apply equally well to the same word where it appears at other levels in the descriptors.
- Translate a set of level descriptors into the discourse of your programme / discipline / the subjects taught in your department (etc).
- Pick the descriptors for one level in a set of descriptors and use this as the basis of an information sheet for students about the standards of learning that are expected of them at that level. Broadly maintain the headings used in the descriptors. The outcome of this exercise is particularly helpful for Master's level students who are often returning to a formal learning situation after many years and may not feel that they know what is expected of them.
- Write sets of learning outcomes for a module (ie broadly on the same subject matter) that is to be presented at levels 1, then level 2 and then level 3. In what ways do the learning outcomes reflect level? The subject matter for this exercise will need to be something that sensibly might be taught at three different levels. If finding such a subject proves difficult, the development of learning outcomes for modules promoting student writing skills presented at the three levels will work well.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 : SEEC Levels Descriptors (revised version)

Notes on the use of the descriptors

- Areas of learning differ according to the extent to which the knowledge or skills developed are **generic** or more **subject specific**. The areas of learning are labelled accordingly.
- In general, progression is characterised by two important related factors –
 - the **autonomy** of the learner
 - the increasing **responsibility** that is expected of the learner in the guidance given and the tasks set
- Some or all of the following skills will be identified by subject specialists at any level. It may be useful for subject specialists to develop more detailed descriptors of these skills in association with the other level descriptors in order to determine achievement at each level.
 - a) Investigative skills/methods of enquiry;
 - b) Laboratory skills/fieldcraft;
 - c) Data and information processing/IT;
 - d) Content/textual analysis;
 - e) Performance skills;
 - f) Product development;
 - g) Professional skills;
 - h) Spatial awareness;
 - i) Management of resources.

HE Level 1

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner:

- **Knowledge base:** has a given factual and/or conceptual knowledge base with emphasis on the nature of the field of study and appropriate terminology
- **Ethical issues:** can demonstrate awareness of ethical issues in current areas of study and is able to discuss these in relation to personal beliefs and values.

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Analysis:** can analyse with guidance using given classifications/principles
- **Synthesis:** can collect and categorise ideas and information in a predictable and standard format
- **Evaluation:** can evaluate the reliability of data using defined techniques and/or tutor guidance
- **Application:** can apply given tools/methods accurately and carefully to a well defined problem and begin to appreciate the complexity of the issues

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Group working:** can work effectively with others as a member of a group and meet obligations to others (for example, tutors, peers, and colleagues)
- **Learning resources:** can work within an appropriate ethos and can use and access a range of learning resources
- **Self evaluation:** can evaluate own strengths and weakness within criteria largely set by others
- **Management of information:** can manage information, collect appropriate data from a range of sources and undertake simple research tasks with external guidance
- **Autonomy:** can take responsibility for own learning with appropriate support
- **Communications:** can communicate effectively in a format appropriate to the discipline(s) and report practical procedures in a clear and concise manner
- **Problem solving:** can apply given tools/methods accurately and carefully to a well defined problem and begins to appreciate the complexity of the issues in the discipline

Practical skills (subject specific)

The learner:

- **Application of skills:** can operate in predictable, defined contexts that require use of a specified range of standard techniques
- **Autonomy in skill use:** is able to act with limited autonomy, under direction or supervision, within defined guidelines

HE Level 2

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner:

- **Knowledge base:** has a detailed knowledge of major theories of the discipline(s) and an awareness of a variety of ideas, contexts and frameworks
- **Ethical issues:** is aware of the wider social and environmental implications of area(s) of study and is able to debate issues in relation to more general ethical perspectives

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Analysis:** can analyse a range of information with minimum guidance using given classifications/principles and can compare alternative methods and techniques for obtaining data
- **Synthesis:** can reformat a range of ideas and information towards a given purpose
- **Evaluation:** can select appropriate techniques of evaluation and can evaluate the relevance and significance of the data collected
- **Application:** can identify key elements of problems and choose appropriate methods for their resolution in a considered manner

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Group working:** can interact effectively within a team / learning group, giving and receiving information and ideas and modifying responses where appropriate
- **Learning resources:** can manage learning using resources for the discipline. Can develop working relationships of a professional nature within the discipline(s)
- **Self evaluation:** can evaluate own strengths and weakness, challenge received opinion and develop own criteria and judgement
- **Management of information:** can manage information. Can select appropriate data from a range of sources and develop appropriate research strategies
- **Autonomy:** can take responsibility for own learning with minimum direction
- **Communications:** can communicate effectively in a manner appropriate to the discipline(s) and report practical procedures in a clear and concise manner in a variety of formats
- **Problem-solving:** can identify key areas of problems and choose appropriate tools / methods for their resolution in a considered manner

Practical skills (subject specific)

The learner:

- **Application of skills:** can operate in situations of varying complexity and predictability requiring application of a wide range of techniques
- **Autonomy in skill use:** able to act with increasing autonomy, with reduced need for supervision and direction, within defined guidelines

HE Level 3

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner:

- **Knowledge base:** has a comprehensive/detailed knowledge of a major discipline(s) with areas of specialisation in depth and an awareness of the provisional nature of knowledge
- **Ethical issues:** is aware of personal responsibility and professional codes of conduct and can incorporate a critical ethical dimension into a major piece of work

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Analysis:** can analyse new and/or abstract data and situations without guidance, using a range of techniques appropriate to the subject
- **Synthesis:** with minimum guidance can transform abstract data and concepts towards a given purpose and can design novel solutions
- **Evaluation:** can critically evaluate evidence to support conclusions/recommendations, reviewing its reliability, validity and significance. Can investigate contradictory information/identify reasons for contradictions
- **Application:** is confident and flexible in identifying and defining complex problems and can apply appropriate knowledge and skills to their solution

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Group working:** can interact effectively within a team / learning / professional group, recognise, support or be proactive in leadership, negotiate in a professional context and manage conflict
- **Learning resources:** with minimum guidance can manage own learning using full range of resources for the discipline(s). Can work professionally within the discipline
- **Self evaluation:** is confident in application of own criteria of judgement and can challenge received opinion and reflect on action. Can seek and make use of feedback
- **Management of information:** can select and manage information, competently undertake reasonably straight-forward research tasks with minimum guidance
- **Autonomy:** can take responsibility for own work and can criticise it
- **Communications:** can engage effectively in debate in a professional manner and produce detailed and coherent project reports
- **Problem solving:** is confident and flexible in identifying and defining complex problems and the application of appropriate knowledge, tools / methods to their solution

Practical skills (subject specific)

The learner:

- **Application of skills:** can operate in complex and unpredictable contexts, requiring selection and application from a wide range of innovative or standard techniques
- **Autonomy in skill use:** able to act autonomously, with minimal supervision or direction, within agreed guidelines

Masters Level

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner:

- **Knowledge base:** has depth and systematic understanding of knowledge in specialised / applied areas and / across areas and can work with theoretical / research-based knowledge at the forefront of their academic discipline
- **Ethical issues:** has the awareness and ability to manage the implications of ethical dilemmas and work proactively with others to formulate solutions
- **Disciplinary methodologies:** has a comprehensive understanding of techniques / methodologies applicable to their own work (theory or research-based)

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Analysis:** with critical awareness can undertake analysis of complex, incomplete or contradictory areas of knowledge communicating the outcome effectively
- **Synthesis:** with critical awareness, can synthesise information in a manner that may be innovative, utilising knowledge or processes from the forefront of their discipline / practice
- **Evaluation:** has a level of conceptual understanding that will allow her/him critically to evaluate research, advanced scholarship and methodologies and argue alternative approaches
- **Application:** can demonstrate self direction and originality in problem solving. Can act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Group working:** can work effectively with a group as leader or member. Can clarify task and make appropriate use of the capacities of group members. Is able to negotiate and handle conflict with confidence
- **Learning resources:** is able to use full range of learning resources
- **Self evaluation:** is reflective on own and others' functioning in order to improve practice
- **Management of information:** can competently undertake research tasks with minimum guidance
- **Autonomy:** is independent and self critical learner, guiding the learning of others
- **Communications:** can engage confidently in academic and professional communication with others, reporting on action clearly, autonomously and competently
- **Problem solving:** has independent learning ability required for continuing professional study, making professional use of others where appropriate

Practical skills (subject specific)

The learner:

- **Application of skills:** can operate in complex and unpredictable, possibly specialised contexts, and has an overview of the issues governing good practice
- **Autonomy in skill use:** is able to exercise initiative and personal responsibility in professional practice
- **Technical expertise:** has technical expertise, performs smoothly with precision and effectiveness; can adapt skills and design or develop new skills or procedures for new situations

Taught Doctorate

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner:

- **Knowledge base:** has great depth and systematic understanding of a substantial body of knowledge. Can work with theoretical / research knowledge at the forefront of the discipline at publication-quality / peer reviewed standards
- **Ethical issues:** can analyse and manage the implications of ethical dilemmas and work pro-actively with others to formulate solutions
- **Disciplinary methodologies:** has a comprehensive understanding of techniques / methodologies applicable to the discipline (theory or research-based)

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Analysis:** with critical awareness, can undertake analysis, managing complexity, incompleteness of data or contradiction in the areas of knowledge
- **Synthesis:** can undertake synthesis of new approaches, in a manner that can contribute to the development of methodology or understanding in that discipline or practice
- **Evaluation:** has a level of conceptual understanding and critical capacities that will allow independent evaluation of research, advanced scholarship and methodologies. Can argue alternative approaches
- **Application:** can act independently and with originality in problem solving, is able to lead in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner:

- **Group working:** can lead /work effectively with group. Can clarify task, managing the capacities of group members, negotiating and handling conflict with confidence
- **Learning resources:** is able to use full range of learning resources
- **Self evaluation:** is reflective on own and others' functioning in order to improve practice
- **Management of information:** competently and independently can undertake innovative research tasks
- **Autonomy:** is independent and self-critical as learner; supports the learning of others
- **Communication:** can communicate complex or contentious information clearly and effectively to specialists / non-specialists, understands lack of understanding in others. Can act as a recognised and effective consultant
- **Problem solving:** independently can continue own professional study, professionally can make use of others within / outside the discipline.

Practical Skills (specific skills)

The learner:

- **Application of skills:** can operate in complex and unpredictable / specialised contexts that may be at the forefront of knowledge. Has overview of the issues governing good practice
- **Autonomy in skill use:** can act in a professional capacity for self / others, with responsibility and largely autonomously initiative in complex and unpredictable situations
- **Technical expertise:** has technical mastery, performs smoothly with precision and effectiveness; can adapt skills and design or develop new skills / procedures for new situations

Appendix 2 : Quality Assurance Agency Qualification Framework for Higher Education – Qualification Descriptors

General C (Certificate) Descriptors

Students successfully completing programme requirements at this level will have demonstrated:

- (1) knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles associated with their area(s) of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these within the context of that area of study;
- (2) an ability to present, evaluate, and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, to develop lines of argument and make sound judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study.

Typically, successful students at this level will be able to:

- (a) evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their area(s) of study and/or work;
- (b) communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and coherent arguments;
- (c) undertake further training and develop new skills within a structured and managed environment;

and will have:

- (d) qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.

General I (Intermediate) Descriptors

Students successfully completing programme requirements at this level will have demonstrated:

- (1) knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed;
- (2) ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context;
- (3) knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in their subject(s), and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study;
- (4) an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.

Typically, successful students at this level will be able to:

- (a) use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis;
- (b) effectively communicate information, arguments, and analysis, in a variety of forms, to specialist and non-specialist audiences, and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively;
- (c) undertake further training, develop existing skills, and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations;

and will have:

- (d) qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

General H (Honours) Descriptors

Students successfully completing programme requirements at this level will have demonstrated:

- (1) a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline;
- (2) an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline;
- (3) conceptual understanding that enables the student:
 - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline; and
 - to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline;
- (4) an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge;
- (5) the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (eg refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Typically, successful students at this level will be able to:

- (a) apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects;
- (b) critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem;
- (c) communicate information, ideas, problems, and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;

and will have:

- (d) qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
 - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility;
 - decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts; and
 - the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.

General M (Masters) Descriptors

Students successfully completing programme requirements at this level will have demonstrated:

- (1) a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice;
- (2) a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship;
- (3) originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline;

(4) conceptual understanding that enables the student:

- to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline; and
- to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

Typically, successful students at this level will be able to:

- (a) deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- (b) demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level;
- (c) continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level;

and will have:

- (d) the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
 - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility;
 - decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations; and
 - the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

General D (Doctoral) Descriptors

Students successfully completing programme requirements at this level will have demonstrated:

- (1) the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication;
- (2) a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice;
- (3) the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;
- (4) a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Typically, successful students at this level will be able to:

- (a) make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- (b) continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas, or approaches;

and will have:

- (c) the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

Appendix 3 : A Comparison of Levels Implied by SEEC Credit Level Descriptors and QAA Qualification Framework in Higher Education Qualification Descriptors

This appendix is derived from an article published in SEEC News (Moon, 2001a)

The analysis of the differences between the descriptors below aims to identify the points of difference in the sets of descriptors which might imply different expectations of learners at the same level. Other than noting general themes, comment is not made on areas in which the descriptors broadly concur. Because of their orientation toward employers, the QFHE descriptors make references to the learner's potential performance in employment but generally such statements will apply also to the performance of learners who are progressing to a higher level in education.

SEEC Level 1 / Qualification descriptors - Certificate Level (C)

Both sets of descriptors imply a proficiency in working with basic concepts. The principle differences between the two sets of descriptors at this level is firstly in the reference in the SEEC descriptors to the relative amount of guidance provided for learner performance and correspondingly the degree of autonomy expected. Secondly there is reference in the SEEC descriptors to the relative predictability of the subject material with which learners work.

It is somewhat difficult to ascertain the expected level of performance from the QAA qualification descriptors at this level partly because they lack indicators such as the relative degree of guidance or autonomy. In general terms, the qualification descriptors seem to cover a broader range of achievement than the SEEC descriptors, and to indicate a higher achievement than the latter.

SEEC Level 2 / Qualification descriptors - Intermediate Level (I)

Both sets of descriptors describe the learner as gaining flexibility and ability to cope with a broader range of subject matter in more complex contexts, using the main techniques of the discipline. Both imply the attainment of a better-substantiated understanding of the nature of the subject or the discipline. Generally the SEEC descriptors at this level imply an expectation of increasing autonomy in the learner and an ability to work with material which is less predictable.

The qualification descriptors include references to critical evaluation and critical analysis, which are terms evident in the SEEC descriptors only at level HE3. The qualification descriptors also indicate expectation of a greater proficiency in learners for the communication of information (within and beyond the discipline) in the form of argument and analysis. For these several reasons the qualification descriptors seem to imply the expectation of a higher level of achievement than the SEEC descriptors.

SEEC Level 3 / Qualification descriptors Honours Level (H)

Learners are expected to be in command of a broad range of knowledge in their subject, with detailed knowledge in some areas. Both sets of descriptors indicate an expectation of learners to have an understanding of the nature of knowledge and independently to be able to present and work with it in relatively sophisticated and well considered manners. They are expected to be self-critical and to manage their own learning effectively, and able critically to review other material. The descriptors both imply that the learner can function in a complex and unpredictable context.

In terms of apparent level differences between the descriptors, qualification descriptors describe learners at working sometimes at the 'forefront' of their discipline. SEEC descriptors place the notion of working with advanced levels of a discipline at Master's level and working 'at the current limits of theoretical and /or research knowledge' at the level of Taught Doctorate. There is a greater emphasis on a research orientation for learning in the qualification descriptors at level HE3, with learners using original data or research information. However, there are some aspects of the qualification level H descriptors that seem, if anything, to imply a lower level of functioning than the previous level. For example, at level I, learners 'will typically be able to effectively communicate information, arguments, and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences'. At level H, they 'will be able to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences'.

At level 3 /level H, perhaps because we are more accustomed to discussing achievement in student learning, the overall pictures of level implied by the two sets of descriptors seem to concur even if they emerge from the description of sometimes differing qualities.

Postgraduate levels: SEEC / Qualification descriptors at SEEC Master's and Taught Doctorate and QAA M and D

In the postgraduate levels, work has been done on the SEEC descriptors deliberately in order to align their wording more closely with that of the qualification descriptors - as a matter of convenience for the users. For this reason, only a few general comments are made. There is anyway less likelihood of conflict between the two sets of descriptors at postgraduate levels since the naming of qualifications tend to be more stable.

At Masters stage both sets of descriptors imply that the learner will be relatively autonomous and proficient in using the tools of the discipline for investigation and inquiry. She will be able critically to evaluate research and scholarship in the discipline, using this understanding to solve methodological problems.

At the level of the Taught Doctorate / level D, there is a difference in the focus of the descriptors. The SEEC descriptors attempt only to describe the level of learning that is derived from 'taught' or managed learning courses that are run at this level. The qualification descriptors focus on research ability and to the learning that emerges as a result of research. The difference is appropriate since credit is normally accorded only to taught / managed learning and not to research. Despite the different focuses, both sets of descriptors imply that the learner is functioning at the forefront of areas of her discipline; is autonomous, can be innovative, understands the complexities of the discipline and can manage unpredictable situations and the difficulties that others may experience in the field.

It is worth remembering at this level that very often the learning / teaching element of taught doctorates is, in fact, located at Master's level and not at Taught Doctorate level.

Some general points

In this comparison, it is important not to become too caught up in detail in looking at the relative levels implied by sets of descriptors. Descriptors are using very blunt instruments – words with slippery meanings - that are used to fashion important but equally slippery statements about student learning. Both sets of descriptors represent attempts to describe something better than we have managed to describe it before.

In terms of the comparison between SEEC credit levels and qualification levels, overall, there is a relatively close match of learning quality implied by the two systems. In practical terms this can mean that an institution could use both systems in parallel as is suggested in the main text of this book

Appendix 4 : Glossary / Acronyms

APL or AP(E)L – Accreditation of Prior (Certificated) Learning or of Prior Experiential Learning

CQFW – Credits and Qualifications Framework for Wales Project

DfEE – Department of Education and Employment

HE – Higher Education

HECIW – Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales

InCCA – Inter-consortium Credit Agreement

NICATS – Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System

NUCCAT – Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer

NVQ – National Vocational Qualifications

QCA – Qualification and Curriculum Agency

QFHE – Qualifications Framework for Higher Education

QAA – Quality Assurance Agency

SEEC – Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer

Ufi – University for Industry

