



SOUTHERN ENGLAND CONSORTIUM
FOR CREDIT ACCUMULATION AND TRANSFER

SEEC Credit Level Descriptors 2001

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Background

The original SEEC level descriptors were published in 1996 (Credit Guidelines, Models and Protocols (DfEE 1996). They were developed, over two years, by colleagues from SEEC institutions, in collaboration with colleagues from member institutions of the Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales (HECIW)

The descriptors were presented in a tabular format with three broad categories: Operational Contexts, (three sub-headings), Cognitive Descriptors (four sub-headings) and Other Transferable Skills (six sub-headings).

When QAAHE adopted the Dearing categories:

- Development of Knowledge and Understanding
- Cognitive/Intellectual skills
- Key/transferable skills
- Practical skills

for subject review, SEEC Council agreed to restructure the SEEC level descriptors by organising the individual descriptors within these four categories, and simplifying the language.

With the publication by QAAHE of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (January 2001), SEEC Council also decided to develop an additional postgraduate level: Taught Doctorate.

The final amendments were the identification of common subheadings to facilitate consistent interpretation. The title was changed to 'Credit Level Descriptors' to differentiate them from the Qualification Descriptors defined by the QAAHE.

GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF CREDIT LEVEL DESCRIPTORS¹

1. What are credit level descriptors?

Credit level descriptors define the level of complexity, relative demand and autonomy expected of a learner on completion of a unit or programme of learning.

They provide a description of levels of learning through a hierarchy of knowledge and skills which begins with basic knowledge and skills required in higher education, to the very highest level of learning found in postgraduate work.

They describe the characteristics and context of learning expected at each level, against which specific *learning outcomes* and *assessment criteria* can be derived in order to develop modules of study and assign credit for achievement of learning at the appropriate level.

2. Format of the SEEC credit level descriptors

The descriptors are grouped under four headings.

- (i) **Development of knowledge and understanding (subject specific):** these descriptors describe:
 - (a) the factual and/or conceptual base of the field of study and the degree of complexity
 - (b) The ethical issues, both personal and in relation to others, that the learner has to address.
- (ii) **Cognitive/intellectual skills (generic):** these descriptors capture the developing higher level cognitive skills and command of knowledge and understanding which we expect of learners as they progress through the education system.
- (iii) **Key transferable skills (generic):** this group of descriptors summarises the continuum of learning through a range of key transferable skills which all students would typically be expected to acquire through any programme of learning.
- (iv) **Practical skills (subject specific)** Many, although not all, subject areas include practical skills which can range from the ability to use IT for data processing and communication, use of instruments, laboratory techniques, performance skills (e.g. drama, music), spatial awareness, design and creative skills. The precise nature of the development of practical skills will be discipline specific and each programme of learning will need to specify the practical skills required.

3. How many credit levels are there? ²

The development of learning which occurs within each individual does not easily divide into levels or stages. However, it is possible to identify the main stages through which learners are expected to travel, whilst accepting there is a degree of arbitrariness in the exact number of levels.

Different award systems have used different definitions of levels. For example the NVQ system has five levels and the Higher Education Qualification Framework, developed by the QAA in consultation with HE institutions, has three undergraduate levels and two postgraduate levels.

The Credit Guidelines for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI) identify *four* pre-higher education levels (one ‘entry’ level and three further levels), *three* undergraduate levels and *two* postgraduate levels. This creates a framework of nine levels in total, of which the descriptors in this booklet address five.

Undergraduate:

Level 4: HE level 1

Level 5: HE level 2

Level 6: HE level 3

Postgraduate:

Level 7: HE level M

Level 8: HE level D (Taught)

4. How are credit level descriptors used?

The five principal uses of the level descriptors are: (a) curriculum design, (b) to guide the assignment of credit, (c) to provide guidelines for validation panels, (d) to provide guidelines for recognition of the level of learning from experience in non-formal settings, and (e) for the purposes of staff development.

A. Framework for curriculum design

Credit level descriptors can be used as the means by which each subject area can check the level of demand, complexity, depth of study and degree of learner autonomy expected at each level of the individual programme of study. The credit level descriptors are “generic”; it follows that course teams need to translate the generic descriptors into descriptors which identify the subject specific requirements of a programme of study.

A useful exercise for subject teams is to examine their current provision by mapping their existing learning outcomes against the credit level descriptors and identifying areas of weaknesses and any gaps in the curriculum. The assessment of all learning

outcomes identified within the template of the level descriptors can then be examined to identify skills which are not being assessed, or some which may be over-assessed.

The descriptors can be used in the design of learning outcomes in a way which reflects the student's progression through a course of study and to write appropriate assessment criteria.

B. To guide the assignment of credit

The level at which credit is assigned can be determined with reference to the hierarchy of nine generic level descriptors, which span the levels currently in use in the Further and Higher Education sectors. Only one level can be assigned to any given module or unit of study. When the module or unit forms part of a larger programme of learning it should be located at the appropriate level for that module or unit irrespective of the overall level of the ultimate award.

C. To guide validation of standards of programmes of study

Although the credit level descriptors are not 'standards', they provide useful indicators of learning outcomes expected at any stage and therefore may be used as the basis for judgements about the standard of work being required for particular awards.

Each award should state the number of credits required at each specified level. Awards typically require credits at more than one level which are accumulated as students progress through the programme of study.

Alternatively students can transfer credit already awarded, or apply for the assessment of any prior experiential learning, which can count towards a given award.

A validating panel will need to be satisfied that the proposed programme requires students to achieve appropriate standards of work at each level of the award. Credit level descriptors provide a template against which the learning outcomes of the modules within any given programme of learning can be tested to establish whether they are appropriate to the level at which the module is located.

Validating panels may also wish to consider the overall coherence of students' programmes of study and progression through the programme in terms of increasing level of

- demand
- complexity
- depth of study
- student autonomy

D. To provide guidelines for identification of the level of learning from experience

Credit level descriptors enable students and tutors to identify the appropriate level at which prior learning can be recognised for the award of credit. Evidence brought by students of their prior learning can be placed at the appropriate level by using the credit level descriptors³.

E. For the purposes of staff development

The credit level descriptors can be used for different types of staff development related to the functions described above, including course and module design, writing learning outcomes and assessment criteria, and accreditation of prior experiential learning.

5. Credit Level Descriptors and HEQF Qualification Descriptors

In the *Higher Education Qualifications Framework* published by the QAAHE (QAA 2001) **qualification descriptors** are used to *exemplify the outcomes of the main qualification at each level and demonstrate the nature of change between levels. They provide clear points of reference at each level, and describe outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications.* (p. 5).

The **qualification descriptors** are quite distinct from **credit level descriptors**. The latter are used to locate the level of a module/unit and to inform the definition of learning outcomes and assessment criteria at the specific level.

Because there is a fundamental difference in the intended uses for the credit level descriptors and the qualification descriptors, the potential for confusion does exist⁴.

The essential difference is that qualification descriptors relate to whole qualifications and encompass all qualifications at a particular level. Any specific qualification is likely, however, to consist of a *range* of module/units at different credit levels and credit volumes appropriate to the qualification.

In summary, **credit level descriptors** are essentially aids to course development while **qualification descriptors** are aids to the quality assurance of programmes and terminal qualifications.

³ Further information on the assessment of, and the award of credit for, prior (experiential) learning can be gained in the SEEC publication, *How to do APEL* Dr. Tony Wailey, (SEEC, February 2002)

⁴ Dr Jenny Moon has explored the critical differences in *Comparison of the QAA Qualification Descriptors and the Revised SEEC Credit Level Descriptors*, Jenny Moon, SEEC News 20 (SEEC, September 2001)

*SEEC Credit Level
Descriptors 2001*

Notes on interpretation 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 the context of the subject content, 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.

Level 4: 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 begin to appreciate the complexity of the issues in the discipline.

Practical skills (subject specific)

The Learner:

- **Application:** 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.

Level 5: 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.

Level 6: 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 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.
- **Information management:** can select and manage information, competently undertaking 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.

Level 7: Masters

Development of Knowledge and Understanding

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 pro-actively with others to formulate solutions.
- **Disciplinary methodologies:** has a comprehensive understanding of techniques / methodologies applicable to their own work (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 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 the 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 initiative and originality in problem solving. Can act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level, making decisions in complex and unpredictable situations.

Key / Transferable Skills

The learner:

- **Group working:** can work effectively with a group as leader or member. Can clarify tasks 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 an independent and self critical learner, guiding the learning of others and managing own requirements for continuing professional development.
- **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

The learner:

- **Application of skills:** can operate in complex and unpredictable and/or 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 and/or procedures for new situations.

Level 8: Taught Doctorate

Development of Knowledge and Understanding

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 peer reviewed standards/ publication quality.
- **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 and Intellectual Skills

The learner:

- **Analysis:** with critical awareness, can undertake analysis, managing complexity, incompleteness of data or contradictions in the areas of knowledge.

- **Synthesis:** can synthesise 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 allows 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

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:** can undertake innovative research tasks competently and independently.
- **Autonomy:** is independent and self-critical as learner; guides and supports the learning of others and can manage own continuing professional development.
- **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:** can continue own professional study independently, can make use of others professionally within / outside the discipline.

Practical 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 and with 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.

LIST OF MEMBERS

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