

*Credit Level Descriptors
for Higher Education - 2016*



This edition of the seec level descriptors updates the context for their use to reflect changes in the sector since they last underwent major review in 2010. The descriptors themselves remain unchanged.

They are provided free to those who may find them of use. We would request that, where appropriate, you acknowledge their source as:

seec (2016) credit level descriptors for Higher Education available at
www.seec.org.uk

We would welcome examples of their use and comments on their content and structure. You can contact us via our website where you will find resources to support their use.

SEEC Board of Trustees, November 2016

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Definition and context

What are credit level descriptors?

Credit level descriptors define the level of challenge, complexity, and autonomy expected of a learner on completion of a defined and bounded learning activity such as a module¹ or programme of learning. They provide a description of increasing levels of learning (from level 3 to level 8) categorised in relation to knowledge, understanding and skills. As such they represent one articulation of the expected learning gain of learners as they progress through higher education.

Credit level descriptors are a useful reference point for anyone with a responsibility for benchmarking, contextualising and credit-rating learning, whether this learning derives from within or without a formal curriculum. Their considered use aids consistency and transparency of expectations and outcomes for all parties: higher education institutions, academics, employers, professional bodies and learners.

External reference points

The following provide key reference points and context for the descriptors:

- The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (November 2014), available at www.qaa.ac.uk.
- The issuing of guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England (August 2008), available at www.qaa.ac.uk.
- Moves towards the harmonisation of definitions and the use of credit across Europe (see A Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (available at www.ehea.info) and through revisions to the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, see for example the ECTS User Guide 2015, available at www.ec.europa.eu).
- The development of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to cover vocational education up to level 8 and its subsequent replacement by the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) in October 2015 (further information available at www.gov.uk)
- Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (2016), available at www.gov.wales.
- The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (see SCQF Handbook, volumes 1 and 2, available at www.scqf.org.uk)

¹ The term 'module' is used in this document to indicate any method of organisation of learning; institutions may have their own term such as 'unit'.

Relationship to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ) (QAA, 2014) defines the learning standards expectations for a range of nationally recognised higher education qualifications, such as Certificates of Higher Education, Diplomas of Higher Education, Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral degrees. The FHEQ is, as such, a set of 'qualification descriptors', which define learning expectations at the terminal qualification level only. For example, a Bachelors degree qualification descriptor will describe learning expectations at level 6 but not at levels 4 or 5. The essential difference between qualification descriptors and credit level descriptors is that the former relate to whole qualifications, which may be at one or more academic level. The more detailed SEEC credit level descriptors focus on and describe the characteristics and context of learning expected at each higher education 'level' rather than by qualification type.

Any specific qualification will normally consist of a *range* of modules at one or more academic level with combined credit volumes appropriate to that qualification. Individual institutions may also define the volume and nature of the credit required at each academic level within the overall expectations of the FHEQ. Thus, for example, some institutions allow the use of a limited amount of level 6 credit (final year undergraduate) towards a level 7 (Master's) award. A focus on the learning expectations of qualifications does not, in itself, provide a benchmark for learning that precedes terminal qualification. However, in the process of the design of programmes and modules that lead to qualifications, it is clearly important that the expectations of learning in qualification descriptors and level descriptors are aligned.

How are credit level descriptors used?

The six principal uses of the SEEC credit level descriptors are:

- a) to guide the assignment of credit through the writing of learning outcomes,
- b) in curriculum design,
- c) to assist in writing assessment criteria and the setting of standards,
- d) to support the recognition of prior learning,
- e) to assist with the recognition of learning in work contexts,
- f) to aid the clear communication of learning expectations, and
- g) for the purposes of staff development.

A. The assignment of credit and the writing of learning outcomes

A key purpose of the SEEC credit level descriptors is to help assign the appropriate higher education level to an identified and bounded learning activity such as a programme module. This is usually achieved through the credit level descriptors being used by module designers to help write learning outcomes, which clearly articulate the level of learning expected. Individual learning outcomes within a module may span a range of related levels but, overall, the outcomes should clearly locate the module at a particular level. Only one level can be assigned to any given module. When the module forms part of a larger programme of learning, it should be located at the appropriate level for that module irrespective of the overall level of the ultimate award.

Since the credit level descriptors are 'generic' or 'transdisciplinary' and not 'subject' or practice specific, where the credit level descriptors are used to inform the development of learning outcomes for subject/practice specific programmes and/or modules, module designers need to translate them into learning outcomes which identify the subject/practice specific requirements of a programme of study.

B. Curriculum design

The SEEC credit level descriptors can be used in a number of ways to help aid effective curriculum design. They can:

- Provide a means to identify the challenge, complexity, depth of learning and degree of learner autonomy expected at each level of a programme of study.
- Provide a means of establishing that there is broad coverage of the various aspects of learning described by the credit level descriptors across a programme of study. Whilst programmes may not cover all aspects of the level descriptors, there is often a need to ensure that a breadth and balance of skills development is demonstrated. This is particularly the case where a programme of study leads to a qualification that corresponds to the total amount of credit normally achieved within a specific level. For example, 120 credits at levels 4, 5 and 6; and 180 credits at level 7.
- Help to inform the process of writing learning outcomes so that they are produced in a way that supports learner progression through a course of study.

- Help establish broad comparisons across subject/practice areas facilitating credit accumulation and transfer schemes, the design of joint and combined awards and the sharing of modules between programmes.

C. Assessment criteria and the setting of standards

The SEEC credit level descriptors provide a useful benchmark indicator of the learning outcomes expected at each level and may be used as the basis for judgements about the standard of learning required for specific programme modules and their associated assessment. Thus they can assist tutors, external examiners and validation and approval panels in their various roles in the standard setting process.

D. The recognition of prior learning

The SEEC credit level descriptors are useful in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes. They provide a reference point for ascribing credit to 'certificated learning' which has not been credit rated, and they enable learners and tutors to identify the appropriate level at which prior 'experiential learning' can be recognised for the award of credit.

E. Recognition of work-based learning

The SEEC credit level descriptors can assist with identifying the level of learning derived from the work place (formal/informal, employed or voluntary) as part of formal work-based learning programmes. Unlike prior experiential learning, work-based learning is concurrent and integrated with study. Assessment is normally derived from evidence of learning generated from work and the SEEC credit level descriptors can inform judgements about the level of the learning achievement demonstrated.

F. Communicating expectations to learners

Whilst the SEEC credit level descriptors have been primarily designed to help programme/module designers and inform quality assurance processes, they can also be used to help articulate to learners the outcomes expected of their learning and how this should develop as they progress with their studies. Learners may need help and guidance in interpreting what is intended by the language of the descriptors.

G. Staff development

The SEEC 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 the recognition of prior learning.

Principles underpinning the use of the descriptors

The following general principles underpin the intended use of the SEEC credit level descriptors:

- i. The descriptors are designed to assist with the assignment of credit to elements of learning and the structuring of learning opportunities within programmes of study. They are not intended to replace qualifications descriptors but are aligned with the FHEQ.
- ii. The descriptors provide an indicative benchmark for credit-rating and level-setting and are not intended to be all-encompassing or prescriptive in nature.
- iii. The descriptors are generic or transdisciplinary by design and can encompass learning in most subjects and practice contexts.
- iv. Programmes and modules in different subject or practice areas will emphasise different aspects of the descriptors.
- v. The descriptors define learning positively and imply that learning is demonstrated 'effectively' in relation to specific work or study contexts.
- vi. The descriptors provide a benchmark for the academic level of learning but it is not intended that all of the descriptors at a particular level necessarily need to be met in order for the learning to be ascribed to that level.
- vii. Higher-level descriptors subsume the descriptors at lower levels.
- viii. The language of the descriptors has been kept simple wherever possible.
- ix. The descriptors are intended to be used and adapted by institutions and academic practitioners to suit their own development purposes.

The SEEC descriptors

Format and structure

There are many ways in which learning can be described and categorised. The format adopted by the SEEC credit level descriptors reflects the nature of learning commonly recognised by SEEC members in a variety of learning situations and across a range of subject and/or practice areas.

The SEEC credit level descriptors are not meant to be prescriptive or limiting, or to devalue aspects which are not strongly reflected but which might be relevant to particular subjects and/or practice contexts. Rather the intention is to define a set of knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes which can act as a guide for academic practitioners and others seeking to define or recognise learning and ascribe it to a particular academic level.

The level descriptors are designed to help assign credit to higher education-level learning defined by the FHEQ as levels 4 through to 8. However, to provide a context for the consideration of progression to higher education levels, the SEEC credit level descriptors also include level 3.

The SEEC credit level descriptors are also aligned with the England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI) Summary Credit Level Descriptors for consistency.

The descriptors are grouped under five headings.

In order to support their use in a variety of contexts, the descriptors are set out in two different formats; by level and by heading showing comparative learning expectations across academic levels. The descriptors themselves are identical in both formats.

Setting

- Operational context
- Autonomy and responsibility for actions

The context in which learning takes place and the autonomy expected of the learner is an important aspect of defining the level at which learning is taking place. These two descriptors describe how complexity and autonomy increase with level. The setting in which a learner is operating is particularly important in interpreting other descriptors thus this dimension is highlighted first.

Knowledge and understanding

- Knowledge and understanding

These descriptors describe the growing knowledge and conceptual base of the field of study and the degree of complexity expected as the learner progresses. Knowledge and understanding provide the basis for the development of many of the other skills and attributes in the descriptors.

Cognitive skills

- Conceptualisation and critical thinking
- Problem solving, research and enquiry
- Synthesis and creativity
- Analysis and evaluation

These descriptors capture the developing cognitive skills which are expected of learners as they progress towards higher-level work. There are many cognitive skills and possible groupings which might have been included in this area. Those indicated are the ones which SEEC members believed to be most generally relevant. They have been grouped to prevent excessive fragmentation of the descriptors but it is recognised that such groupings are contestable and that subject/practice contexts can lead to different nomenclature, groupings and prioritisation. Users may wish to develop their own categorisation using those provided as a reference point.

Performance and practice

- Adaptation to context
- Performance
- Team and organisational working
- Ethical awareness and application

These skills are described across levels in a range of circumstances, beyond the purely academic, particularly in applied areas.

The descriptors use the term 'team' rather than 'group' to reflect the growing professional nature of expectations in this area. These two terms, whilst related and often inter-changeable, are not synonymous and their use may be context dependent. Those using the descriptors should identify the terminology most appropriate to their circumstances.

Personal and enabling skills

- Personal evaluation and development
- Interpersonal and communication skills

These credit level descriptors emphasise personal development planning, interpersonal and communication skills and are located here because they 'enable' the demonstration of the outcomes of many of the other descriptors.

Further information

Further information on level descriptors and their use can be found on the SEEC web site (www.seec.org.uk).

seec descriptors: by level

Level 3

Summary credit level descriptors	Apply knowledge and skills in a range of complex activities demonstrating comprehension of relevant theories; access and analyse information independently and make reasoned judgements, selecting from a considerable choice of procedures in familiar and unfamiliar contexts and direct own activities, with some responsibility for the output of others.
Setting	
<i>Operational context</i>	Operates in predictable and defined contexts that require the use of given techniques and information sources.
<i>Autonomy and responsibility for actions</i>	Acts largely under direction or supervision, within defined guidelines. Takes responsibility for initiating and completing tasks and procedures.
Knowledge and understanding	
<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	Has an understanding of defined areas of the knowledge base. Demonstrates an awareness of current areas of debate in the field of study.
Cognitive skills	
<i>Conceptualisation and critical thinking</i>	Relates principles and concepts to underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches.
<i>Problem solving, research and enquiry</i>	Carries out defined investigative strategies and communicates results effectively in a given format.
<i>Synthesis and creativity</i>	Collects information to inform a choice of solutions to standard problems in familiar contexts.
<i>Analysis and evaluation</i>	Analyses a range of information using pre-defined principles, frameworks or criteria.
Performance and practice	
<i>Adaptation to context</i>	Undertakes a given and clearly defined role.
<i>Performance</i>	Undertakes given performance tasks that may be complex.
<i>Team and organisational working</i>	Adapts own behaviour to meet obligations to others.
<i>Ethical awareness and application</i>	Has an awareness of the ethical issues in the main areas of study.
Personal and enabling skills	
<i>Personal evaluation and development</i>	Assesses own capabilities against given criteria. Engages in guided development activity.
<i>Interpersonal and communication skills</i>	Uses interpersonal and communication skills to clarify tasks and communicate outcomes in narrowly defined contexts.

Level 4

Summary credit level descriptors	Develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base; employ a range of specialised skills; evaluate information, using it to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable problems; and operate in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.
Setting	
<i>Operational context</i>	Operates in a range of varied but predictable contexts that require the use of a specified range of techniques and information sources.
<i>Autonomy and responsibility for actions</i>	Acts with limited autonomy, under direction or supervision, within defined guidelines. Takes responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.
Knowledge and understanding	
<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	Has a broad understanding of the knowledge base and its terminology or discourse. Appreciates that areas of this knowledge base are open to ongoing debate and reformulation.
Cognitive skills	
<i>Conceptualisation and critical thinking</i>	Identifies principles and concepts underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches, identifying their strengths and weaknesses.
<i>Problem solving, research and enquiry</i>	Identifies a well-defined focus for enquiry, plans and undertakes investigative strategies using a limited and defined range of methods, collects data from a variety of sources, and communicates results effectively in an appropriate format.
<i>Synthesis and creativity</i>	Collects information from a variety of authoritative sources to inform a choice of solutions to standard problems in familiar contexts.
<i>Analysis and evaluation</i>	Judges the reliability of data and information using pre-defined techniques and/or criteria.
Performance and practice	
<i>Adaptation to context</i>	Locates own role in relation to specified and externally defined parameters.
<i>Performance</i>	Undertakes performance tasks that may be complex and non-routine, engaging in self-reflection.
<i>Team and organisational working</i>	Works effectively with others and recognises the factors that affect team performance.
<i>Ethical awareness and application</i>	Demonstrates awareness of ethical issues and is able to discuss these in relation to personal beliefs and values.
Personal and enabling skills	
<i>Personal evaluation and development</i>	Is aware of own capabilities in key areas and engages in development activity through guided self-direction.
<i>Interpersonal and communication skills</i>	Uses interpersonal and communication skills to clarify tasks and identify and rectify issues in a range of contexts.

Level 5

Summary credit level descriptors	Generate ideas through the analysis of concepts at an abstract level with a command of specialised skills and the formulation of responses to well-defined and abstract problems; analyse and evaluate information; exercise significant judgement across a broad range of functions; and accept responsibility for determining and achieving personal or group outcomes.
Setting	
<i>Operational context</i>	Operates in situations of varying complexity and predictability requiring the application of a wide range of techniques and information sources.
<i>Autonomy and responsibility for actions</i>	Acts with limited supervision and direction within defined guidelines, accepting responsibility for achieving personal and/or group outcomes and/or outputs.
Knowledge and understanding	
<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	Has detailed knowledge of well-established theories and concepts. Demonstrates an awareness of different ideas, contexts and frameworks and recognises those areas where the knowledge base is most/least secure.
Cognitive skills	
<i>Conceptualisation and critical thinking</i>	Identifies, analyses and communicates principles and concepts, recognising competing perspectives.
<i>Problem solving, research and enquiry</i>	Undertakes research to provide new information and/or explores new or existing data to identify patterns and relationships. Uses appropriate theoretical models to judge the significance of the data collected, recognising the limitations of the enquiry.
<i>Synthesis and creativity</i>	Collects and synthesises information to inform a choice of solutions to problems in unfamiliar contexts.
<i>Analysis and evaluation</i>	Analyses a range of information, comparing alternative methods and techniques. Selects appropriate techniques/criteria for evaluation and discriminates between the relative relevance and significance of data/evidence collected.
Performance and practice	
<i>Adaptation to context</i>	Identifies external expectations and adapts own performance accordingly.
<i>Performance</i>	Undertakes complex and non-routine performance tasks. Analyses performance of self and others and suggests improvements.
<i>Team and organisational working</i>	Interacts effectively within a team, giving and receiving information and ideas and modifying responses where appropriate. Recognises and ameliorates situations likely to lead to conflict.
<i>Ethical awareness and application</i>	Is aware of personal responsibility and professional codes of conduct.
Personal and enabling skills	
<i>Personal evaluation and development</i>	Assesses own capabilities using justifiable criteria set by self and others taking the wider needs of the context into account. Uses feedback to adapt own actions to reach a desired aim and reviews impact.
<i>Interpersonal and communication skills</i>	Adapts interpersonal and communication skills to a range of situations, audiences and degrees of complexity.

Level 6

Summary credit level descriptors	Critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, utilising specialised skills across an area of study; critically evaluate concepts and evidence from a range of sources; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills and exercise significant judgement in a range of situations; and accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.
Setting	
<i>Operational context</i>	Operates in complex, unpredictable contexts, requiring selection and application from a range of often standard techniques and information sources.
<i>Autonomy and responsibility for actions</i>	Acts with minimal supervision or direction within agreed guidelines, taking responsibility for accessing support and accepting accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.
Knowledge and understanding	
<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	Has a systematic understanding of the knowledge base and its inter-relationship with other fields of study. Demonstrates current understanding of some specialist areas in depth.
Cognitive skills	
<i>Conceptualisation and critical thinking</i>	Works with ideas at a level of abstraction, arguing from competing perspectives. Identifies the possibility of new concepts within existing knowledge frameworks and approaches.
<i>Problem solving, research and enquiry</i>	Demonstrates confidence and flexibility in identifying and defining complex problems. Identifies, selects and uses investigative strategies and techniques to undertake a critical analysis, evaluating the outcomes.
<i>Synthesis and creativity</i>	Applies knowledge in unfamiliar contexts, synthesising ideas or information to generate novel solutions. Achieves a body of work or practice that is coherent and resolved.
<i>Analysis and evaluation</i>	Analyses new, novel and/or abstract data using an appropriate range of established subject-specific techniques. Judges the reliability, validity and significance of evidence to support conclusions and/or recommendations. Suggests reasons for contradictory data/results.
Performance and practice	
<i>Adaptation to context</i>	Locates own role within poorly defined and/or flexible contexts requiring a level of autonomy.
<i>Performance</i>	Seeks and applies new techniques and processes to own performance and identifies how these might be evaluated.
<i>Team and organisational working</i>	Works effectively within a team, supports or is proactive in leadership, negotiates in a professional context and manages conflict. Proactively seeks to resolve conflict.
<i>Ethical awareness and application</i>	Is aware of personal responsibility and professional codes of conduct and incorporates this into their practice.
Personal and enabling skills	
<i>Personal evaluation and development</i>	Takes responsibility for own learning and development using reflection and feedback to analyse own capabilities, appraises alternatives and plans and implements actions.
<i>Interpersonal and communication skills</i>	Sets criteria for, and is effective in, professional and interpersonal communication in a wide range of situations.

Level 7

EWNI Summary credit level descriptors	Display mastery of a complex and specialised area of knowledge and skills, employing advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for related decision making, including use of supervision.
Setting	
<i>Operational context</i>	Operates in complex and unpredictable and/or specialised contexts, requiring selection and application from a wide range of advanced techniques and information sources.
<i>Autonomy and responsibility for actions</i>	Acts with initiative in decision-making and accessing support within professional or given guidelines, accepting full accountability for outcomes.
Knowledge and understanding	
<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	Has a deep and systematic understanding within a specialised field of study and its interrelationship with other relevant disciplines. Demonstrates an understanding of current theoretical and methodological approaches and how these affect the way the knowledge base is interpreted.
Cognitive skills	
<i>Conceptualisation and critical thinking</i>	Uses ideas at a high level of abstraction. Develops critical responses to existing theoretical discourses, methodologies or practices and suggests new concepts or approaches.
<i>Problem solving, research and enquiry</i>	Designs and undertakes substantial investigations to address significant areas of theory and/or practice. Selects appropriate advanced methodological approaches and critically evaluates their effectiveness.
<i>Synthesis and creativity</i>	Flexibly and creatively applies knowledge in unfamiliar contexts, synthesises ideas or information in innovative ways, and generates transformative solutions.
<i>Analysis and evaluation</i>	Undertakes analysis of complex, incomplete or contradictory evidence/data and judges the appropriateness of the enquiry methodologies used. Recognises and argues for alternative approaches.
Performance and practice	
<i>Adaptation to context</i>	Autonomously adapts performance to multiple contexts.
<i>Performance</i>	Autonomously implements and evaluates improvements to performance, drawing on innovative or sectoral best practice.
<i>Team and organisational working</i>	Works effectively with multiple teams as leader or member. Clarifies tasks and make appropriate use of the capacities of team members, resolving likely conflict situations before they arise.
<i>Ethical awareness and application</i>	Incorporates a critical ethical dimension to their practice, managing the implications of ethical dilemmas. Works proactively with others to formulate solutions.
Personal and enabling skills	
<i>Personal evaluation and development</i>	Uses personal reflection to analyse self and own actions. Makes connections between known and unknown areas, to allow for adaptation and change.
<i>Interpersonal and communication skills</i>	Identifies, evaluates and maintains capabilities and qualities to support effective communication in a range of complex and specialised contexts.

Level 8

EWNI Summary credit level descriptors	Make a significant and original contribution to a specialised field of inquiry, demonstrating a command of methodological issues and engaging in critical dialogue with peers and accepting full accountability for outcomes.
Setting	
<i>Operational context</i>	Operates in complex and unpredictable and/or specialised contexts at the forefront of knowledge.
<i>Autonomy and responsibility for actions</i>	Acts autonomously and with initiative, often in a professional capacity with responsibility for self and often others.
Knowledge and understanding	
<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	Works with theoretical/research knowledge at the forefront of the discipline. Demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of techniques and methodologies applicable to the discipline.
Cognitive skills	
<i>Conceptualisation and critical thinking</i>	Develops ideas at a high level of abstraction. Develops theoretical discourses, methodologies or practices, critically analysing their development and application.
<i>Problem solving, research and enquiry</i>	Acts independently and with originality in problem solving. Develops or adapts appropriate advanced methodological approaches and critically evaluates their effectiveness.
<i>Synthesis and creativity</i>	Synthesises and applies new approaches, in a manner that can contribute to the development of methodology or understanding in that discipline or practice.
<i>Analysis and evaluation</i>	Undertakes independent analysis or evaluation, managing complexity, incompleteness of data or contradictions in areas of knowledge.
Performance and practice	
<i>Adaptation to context</i>	Autonomously adapts performance to contexts requiring professional outputs.
<i>Performance</i>	Has technical mastery, performs smoothly with precision and effectiveness, can adapt or develop skills and procedures for new situations.
<i>Team and organisational working</i>	Leads and/or works effectively with often multiple teams in multiple roles. Manages the capacities of members to achieve outcomes, handling conflict with confidence.
<i>Ethical awareness and application</i>	Analyses and manages ethical dilemmas and works pro-actively with others to formulate and implement solutions.
Personal and enabling skills	
<i>Personal evaluation and development</i>	Reflects on own and others' functioning in order to improve practice. Is independent and self-critical as a learner. Guides and supports the learning of others and manages own professional development.
<i>Interpersonal and communication skills</i>	Displays consultancy skills. Communicates complex or contentious information clearly and effectively to the target audience.

seec descriptors: comparative summary

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
EWNI Summary credit level descriptors	Apply knowledge and skills in a range of complex activities demonstrating comprehension of relevant theories; access and analyse information independently and make reasoned judgements, selecting from a considerable choice of procedures in familiar and unfamiliar contexts and direct own activities, with some responsibility for the output of others.	Develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base; employ a range of specialised skills; evaluate information, using it to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable problems; and operate in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.	Generate ideas through the analysis of concepts at an abstract level with a command of specialised skills and the formulation of responses to well-defined and abstract problems; analyse and evaluate information; exercise significant judgement across a broad range of functions; and accept responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.	Critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, utilising specialised skills across an area of study; critically evaluate concepts and evidence from a range of sources; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills and exercise significant judgement in a range of situations; and accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.	Display mastery of a specialised area of knowledge and skills, employing advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for related decision-making, including use of supervision.	Make a significant and original contribution to a specialised field of inquiry, demonstrating a command of methodological issues and engaging in critical dialogue with peers and accepting full accountability for outcomes.

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Setting						
<i>Operational context</i>	Operates in predictable and defined contexts that require the use of given techniques and information sources.	Operates in a range of varied but predictable contexts that require the use of a specified range of techniques and information sources.	Operates in situations of varying complexity and predictability requiring the application of a wide range of techniques and information sources.	Operates in complex and unpredictable contexts, requiring selection and application from a range of largely standard techniques and information sources.	Operates in complex and unpredictable and/or specialised contexts, requiring selection and application from a wide range of advanced techniques and information sources.	Operates in complex and unpredictable and/or specialised contexts at the forefront of knowledge.
<i>Autonomy and responsibility for actions</i>	Acts largely under direction or supervision, within defined guidelines. Takes responsibility for initiating and completing tasks and procedures.	Acts with limited autonomy, under direction or supervision, within defined guidelines. Takes responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.	Acts with limited supervision and direction within defined guidelines, accepting responsibility for achieving personal and/or group outcomes and/or outputs.	Acts with minimal supervision or direction within agreed guidelines, taking responsibility for accessing support and accepting accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.	Acts with initiative in decision-making and accessing support within professional or given guidelines, accepting full accountability for outcomes.	Acts autonomously and with initiative, often in a professional capacity with responsibility for self and often others.

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Knowledge and understanding						
<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	Has an understanding of defined areas of the knowledge base. Demonstrates an awareness of current areas of debate in the field of study	Has a broad understanding of the knowledge base and its terminology or discourse. Appreciates that areas of this knowledge base are open to ongoing debate and reformulation.	Has detailed knowledge of well-established theories and concepts. Demonstrates an awareness of different ideas, contexts and frameworks and recognises those areas where the knowledge base is most/least secure.	Has a systematic understanding of the knowledge base and its inter-relationship with other fields of study. Demonstrates current understanding of some specialist areas in depth.	Has a deep and systematic understanding within a specialised field of study and its interrelationship with other relevant disciplines. Demonstrates an understanding of current theoretical and methodological approaches and how these affect the way the knowledge base is interpreted.	Works with theoretical/research knowledge at the forefront of the discipline. Demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of techniques and methodologies applicable to the discipline.

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Cognitive skills						
<i>Conceptualisation and critical thinking</i>	Relates principles and concepts to underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches.	Identifies principles and concepts underlying theoretical frameworks and approaches, identifying their strengths and weaknesses.	Identifies, analyses and communicates principles and concepts, recognising competing perspectives.	Works with ideas at a level of abstraction, arguing from competing perspectives. Identifies the possibility of new concepts within existing knowledge frameworks and approaches.	Uses ideas at a high level of abstraction. Develops critical responses to existing theoretical discourses, methodologies or practices and suggests new concepts or approaches.	Develops ideas at a high level of abstraction. Develops theoretical discourses, methodologies or practices, critically analysing their development and application.
<i>Problem solving, research and enquiry</i>	Carries out defined investigative strategies and communicates results effectively in a given format.	Identifies a well-defined focus for enquiry, plans and undertakes investigative strategies using a limited and defined range of methods, collects data from a variety of sources, and communicates results effectively in an appropriate format.	Undertakes research to provide new information and/or explores new or existing data to identify patterns and relationships. Uses appropriate theoretical models to judge the significance of the data collected, recognising the limitations of the enquiry.	Demonstrates confidence and flexibility in identifying and defining complex problems. Identifies, selects and uses investigative strategies and techniques to undertake a critical analysis, evaluating the outcomes.	Designs and undertakes substantial investigations to address significant areas of theory and/or practice. Selects appropriate advanced methodological approaches and critically evaluates their effectiveness.	Acts independently and with originality in problem solving. Develops or adapts appropriate advanced methodological approaches and critically evaluates their effectiveness.
<i>Synthesis and creativity</i>	Collects information to inform a choice of solutions to standard problems in familiar	Collects information from a variety of authoritative sources to inform a choice of solutions to standard problems in familiar	Collects and synthesises information to inform a choice of solutions to problems in unfamiliar contexts.	Applies knowledge in unfamiliar contexts, synthesising ideas or information to generate novel	Flexibly and creatively applies knowledge in unfamiliar contexts, synthesises ideas or information in	Synthesises and applies new approaches, in a manner that can contribute to the development of

	contexts.	contexts.	solutions. Achieves a body of work or practice that is coherent and resolved.	innovative ways, and generates transformative solutions.	methodology or understanding in that discipline or practice.
<i>Analysis and evaluation</i>	Analyses a range of information using pre-defined principles, frameworks or criteria.	Judges the reliability of data and information using pre-defined techniques and/or criteria.	Analyses a range of information, comparing alternative methods and techniques. Selects appropriate techniques/criteria for evaluation and discriminates between the relative relevance and significance of data/evidence collected.	Analyses new, novel and/or abstract data using an appropriate range of established subject-specific techniques. Judges the reliability, validity and significance of evidence to support conclusions and/or recommendations. Suggests reasons for contradictory data/results.	Undertakes analysis of complex, incomplete or contradictory evidence/data and judges the appropriateness of the enquiry methodologies used. Recognises and argues for alternative approaches.
	Undertakes independent analysis or evaluation, managing complexity, incompleteness of data or contradictions in areas of knowledge.				

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Performance and practice						
<i>Adaptation to context</i>	Undertakes a given and clearly defined role.	Locates own role in relation to specified and externally defined parameters.	Identifies external expectations and adapts own performance accordingly.	Locates own role within poorly defined and/or flexible contexts requiring a level of autonomy.	Autonomously adapts performance to multiple contexts.	Autonomously adapts performance to contexts requiring professional outputs.
<i>Performance</i>	Undertakes given performance tasks that may be complex.	Undertakes performance tasks that may be complex and non-routine, engaging in self-reflection.	Undertakes complex and non-routine performance tasks. Analyses performance of self and others and suggests improvements.	Seeks and applies new techniques and processes to own performance and identifies how these might be evaluated.	Autonomously implements and evaluates improvements to performance, drawing on innovative or sectoral best practice.	Has technical mastery, performs smoothly with precision and effectiveness, can adapt or develop skills and procedures for new situations.
<i>Team and organisational working</i>	Adapts own behaviour to meet obligations to others.	Works effectively with others and recognises the factors that affect team performance.	Interacts effectively within a team, giving and receiving information and ideas and modifying responses where appropriate. Recognises and ameliorates situations likely to lead to conflict.	Works effectively within a team, supports or is proactive in leadership, negotiates in a professional context and manages conflict. Proactively seeks to resolve conflict.	Works effectively with multiple teams as leader or member. Clarifies tasks and make appropriate use of the capacities of team members, resolving likely conflict situations before they arise.	Leads and/or works effectively with often multiple teams in multiple roles. Manages the capacities of members to achieve outcomes, handling conflict with confidence.
<i>Ethical awareness and application</i>	Has an awareness of the ethical issues in the main areas of study.	Demonstrates awareness of ethical issues and is able to discuss these in relation to personal beliefs and values.	Is aware of personal responsibility and professional codes of conduct.	Is aware of personal responsibility and professional codes of conduct and incorporates this into their practice.	Incorporates a critical ethical dimension to their practice, managing the implications of ethical dilemmas. Works proactively with others to formulate solutions.	Analyses and manages ethical dilemmas and works pro-actively with others to formulate and implement solutions.

	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Personal and enabling skills						
<i>Personal evaluation and development</i>	Assesses own capabilities against given criteria. Engages in guided development activity.	Is aware of own capabilities in key areas and engages in development activity through guided self-direction.	Assesses own capabilities using justifiable criteria set by self and others, taking the wider needs of the context into account. Uses feedback to adapt own actions to reach a desired aim and reviews impact.	Takes responsibility for own learning and development using reflection and feedback to analyse own capabilities, appraises alternatives and plans and implements actions.	Uses personal reflection to analyse self and own actions. Makes connections between known and unknown areas, to allow for adaptation and change.	Reflects on own and others' functioning in order to improve practice. Is independent and self-critical as a learner. Guides and supports the learning of others and manages own professional development.
<i>Interpersonal and communication skills</i>	Uses interpersonal and communication skills to clarify tasks and communicate outcomes in narrowly defined contexts.	Uses interpersonal and communication skills to clarify tasks and identify and rectify issues in a range of contexts.	Adapts interpersonal and communication skills to a range of situations, audiences and degrees of complexity.	Sets criteria for, and is effective in, professional and interpersonal communication in a wide range of situations.	Identifies, evaluates and maintains capabilities and qualities to support effective communication in a range of complex and specialised contexts.	Displays consultancy skills. Communicates complex or contentious information clearly and effectively to the target audience.

Appendices

Historical note

The seec credit level descriptors were first published in 1996 (Credit Guidelines, Models and Protocols; DfEE 1996), having been developed by colleagues from seec institutions in collaboration with representatives from member institutions of the Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales (HECIW). In 2001/2 they were revised to reflect the four skills categories adopted the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) building on the areas identified in the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report, 1997):

- Development of knowledge and understanding
- Cognitive/intellectual skills
- Key/transferable skills
- Practical skills

Much of the work for that revision was undertaken by colleagues at the, then, Anglia Polytechnic University and by a seec working group.

In 2009 seec undertook a review of member institutions' use of the credit level descriptors which showed that they had often become embedded within institutional frameworks and provided a useful reference source. However, extended experience of the use of credit, particularly in relation to work-based learning and accreditation, suggested the need to review the descriptors to more clearly reference higher-level learning in these contexts and to ensure that they remained appropriate for likely future developments. A seec working group produced revised descriptors in 2010, which were further reviewed through consultation with members and their representatives. The descriptors in this document represent the outcome of this process.

This edition of the credit level descriptors (2016) reflects the current higher education context and updates weblinks. Only minor editorial amendments have been made to the 2010 descriptors, which remain fit for purpose.

We are indebted to academic staff and others who have contributed to the development of the descriptors over the past 20 years.

Abbreviations

CIDG	Credit Issues Development Group
CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EWNI	England, Wales and Northern Ireland
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
FQ-EHEA	Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
NUCCAT	Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer
PSRBs	Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
RQF	Regulated Qualifications Framework
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
WHECC	Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium

Glossary

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)	The identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement. This may either be certificated learning or prior experiential learning, where learning achieved outside education or training systems is assessed and recognised for academic purposes.
Assessment regulations	The rules governing assessment of a programme of study including marking scheme, pass mark, requirements for progression to subsequent levels or stages of a programme and award and classification requirements (for instance in terms of credits to be achieved and specific marks to be attained).
Credit	Credit is awarded to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level.

Credit accumulation	A process of achieving credits over time in relation to a planned programme of study.
Credit level	An indicator of the relative challenge, complexity and depth of learning and of learner autonomy.
Credit transfer	A mechanism which allows credit awarded by a higher education (HE) awarding body to be recognised, quantified and included towards the credit requirements for a programme of study delivered by another HE provider and/or between programmes offered by an HE provider. Each HE awarding body determines what credit it will accept in relation to its individual programmes.
Credit value	The number of credits, at a particular level, assigned to a body of learning. The number of credits is based on the estimated notional learning hours (where one credit represents 10 notional hours of learning).
CATS (Credit Accumulation and Transfer System)	A system which enables learners to accumulate credit, and which facilitates the transfer of that credit within and between education providers.
Learning outcomes	Statement of the learning that a learner is expected to be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning.
Credit level descriptors	The generic or transdisciplinary statements of the outcomes of learning at a specific academic level, used as reference points.
Module/unit	A self-contained, formally structured and bounded learning experience with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes, assessment requirements and criteria.
Notional hours of learning	The number of hours which it is expected that a learner will need to spend, on average, to achieve specified learning outcomes for a programme or module.
Qualification descriptors	Generic statements of the outcomes of study associated with a specific qualification. They provide clear points of reference that describe the main outcomes of a qualification (QAA, 2014).

About seec

seec is a consortium of universities and HE providers working together to advance the use and practice of academic credit, widening access to learning. seec is a registered charity with a formal purpose ‘to advance education for the public benefit by developing credit accumulation and transfer and promoting lifelong learning, at the higher education level’.

Since its formation in 1985², seec has served as a reference point on credit-based learning, structures and processes in the UK and in the developing field of European credit. It promotes links and collaborative ventures between our members, employers, professional bodies and other organisations with interests in credit to open up market opportunities in the UK and internationally.

For more information, visit www.seec.org.uk

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² Originally the South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer, seec has grown to cover institutions throughout the UK and there is no geographical restriction on membership.