

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

TEACHING COMMITTEE

CREDIT LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

1 Background

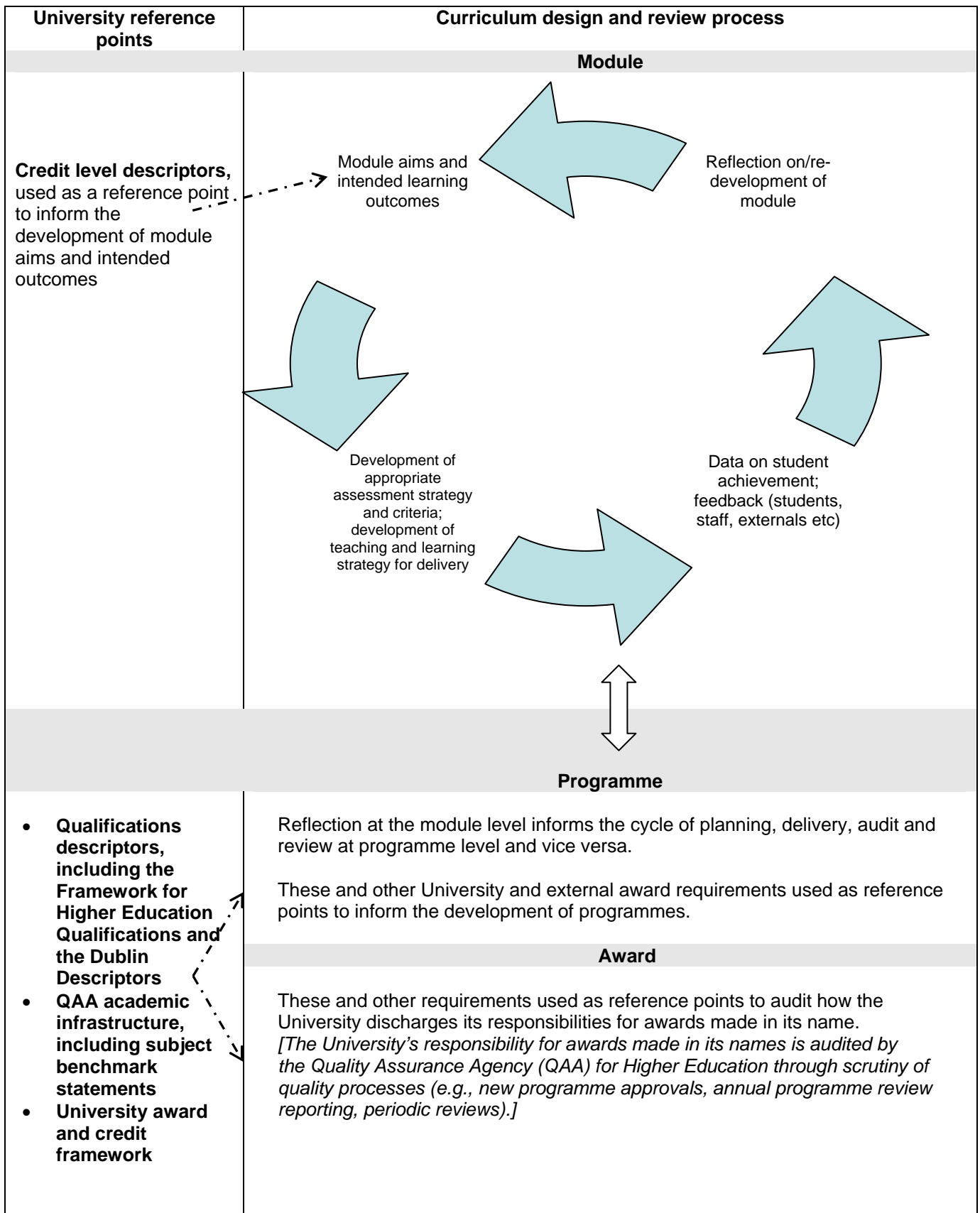
Credit level descriptors provide one of a number of reference points to support the development of curricula and, under the University's new modular scheme, will become part of the University's academic framework. University Teaching Committee has decided to adopt descriptors developed by SEEC (the Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer) – provided here as appendix I.

This document aims to provide staff with some additional context on the purpose and use of credit level descriptors and their relationship with other reference points in the University's academic framework. Specifically, this document should facilitate a clearer understanding of:

1. credit level descriptors as **common reference points** that are used by subject specialists as part of the process of curriculum design and review but do not require blanket 'adherence';
2. the difference between **credit level descriptors** and **qualifications descriptors**. This is elaborated in Appendix II, attached.

Diagram 1 overleaf summarises how credit level descriptors should be used and their relationship to qualifications descriptors.

Diagram 1: the relationship between credit level descriptors, qualifications descriptors and other elements of programme architecture in curriculum design and review



2 Credit level descriptors – context and use

The overall purpose of credit level descriptors is to provide a *common framework of guidance* for departments in designing curricula, which should facilitate:

- the location of modules at an appropriate level within programmes
- reflection on module learning outcomes and how these are articulated
- reflection on grade descriptors, assessment instruments and assessment criteria
- the overall achievement of appropriate programme and award standards.

Specifically, **credit level descriptors**¹ are guides that help identify the relative demand, complexity and depth of learning and learner autonomy expected at each level, and also indicate the differences between the levels.

The descriptors (appendix I) should be interpreted and applied selectively within particular disciplines: they provide a common reference point, but are not universal statements requiring a demonstration of adherence. The SEEC descriptors have been chosen specifically because of the helpful level of detail they provide to inform curriculum design and review, and because of the clear links they make with a broad range of disciplines and approaches to teaching and learning. They are compatible with the emerging national credit framework.

The descriptor at each credit level identifies four broad areas of learning:

- The development of knowledge and understanding (subject specific)
- Cognitive/intellectual skills (generic)
- Key/transferable skills (generic)
- Practical skills (subject specific).

SEEC provides the following additional guidance on interpretation of the descriptors:

‘Notes on interpretation of the descriptors’²

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;

¹ Academic credit in Higher Education in England, Universities UK, QAA 140 12/06

² Quoted from ‘Credit Level Descriptors for Further and Higher Education’, published by SEEC, January 2003

- f) Product development;
- g) Professional skills;
- h) Spatial awareness;
- i) Management of resources.'

As implied above, the application of specific statements within each credit level descriptor to any particular module will vary widely, depending on the discipline, overall programme outcomes and the intended outcomes of the module. So, for example, the rationale for locating a module at level-6/H will not be the same in each case. Two simplified examples are provided below.

Example 1:

A History level-6/H module might have the following amongst its outcomes:

'At the end of the module the student is expected to be able to demonstrate an ability to analyze debates and evaluate different explanatory or analytical frameworks applied to this field'.

This is aligned with descriptors at level-6/H regarding the relatively sophisticated employment of generic cognitive and intellectual skills.

Example 2:

A Biology level-6/H module might have the following amongst its outcomes:

'At the end of the module the student is expected to be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the latest developments in crop improvement'.

In this case, it is the complexity of subject-specific knowledge and understanding that might be regarded as marking this out as a level-6/H module.

3 Additional guidance

Additional practical guidance on employing credit level descriptors is available in Jenny Moon's 'How to Use Credit Level Descriptors' 2002, available at:

<http://www.seec.org.uk/docs/How%20to%20Use%20Level%20Descriptors.pdf>

April 2008

SEEC credit level descriptors: level 3 (HE foundation year) to level 8 (PhD)³

Level 3: FE Level 1/HE 0

Development of Knowledge and Understanding**The Learner:**

- **Knowledge base:** has largely given, possibly uneven and limited factual and conceptual knowledge base. He/she has an appreciation of the breadth of the field of study and the relevant terminology. The learner has some awareness of any the ethical issues in the main areas of study. Is developing the ability to discuss these and to relate them to own personal beliefs and values.

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application)**Within the limits of his/her knowledge and understanding, the learner:**

- Is learning to use the skills of manipulation of knowledge (analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application) to make informed judgements. Her/his abilities to use these skills can be applied independently in relatively simple and familiar contexts or with guidance or structure when working with greater complexity.
- Begins to work beyond routine and defined contexts.

Key/transferable skills (generic)**The Learner:**

- **Group working:** meets obligations to others (tutors/peers); usually adapts in recognition of the effects of groups on own behaviour.
- **Learning resources:** is gaining in confidence in use and access to a range of learning resources with some ability to evaluate the source.
- **Self evaluation:** is generally able to evaluate own strengths and weakness within criteria largely set by others
- **Management of information:** within a defined context, can manage information, collect data from a range of straightforward sources and is gaining in confidence to undertake simple research tasks with external guidance.
- **Autonomy:** can engage in self directed activity with broad guidance and evaluation, accepting responsibility for the quality and quantity of output.
- **Communications:** is developing ability to communicate effectively in a format appropriate to the discipline(s) and there is evidence of progress towards reporting practical procedures in a clear and concise manner. Can present familiar information to an audience.
- **Problem solving:** can apply given tools/methods to a well-defined problem and shows emerging recognition of the complexity of associated issues.

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.

³ Copyright:© SEEC January 2003.

Reproduced with the kind permission of the Southern England Consortium For Credit Accumulation And Transfer
All rights reserved. No part of this appendix may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the author.
The full SEEC document is available at <http://www.seec.org.uk/docs/creditleveldescriptors2003.pdf>

Level 4 (C): 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 (I): 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 (H): 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 (M): 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 proactively 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.

Credit level descriptors and qualifications descriptors

The University's academic framework makes reference to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and will also make reference to the Dublin descriptors of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (links to both documents are provided at the end of this appendix). Whilst there needs to be a clear relationship between qualifications descriptors and credit level descriptors, their function is quite different.

'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...**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.⁴

The QAA's **Framework for Higher Education Qualifications** in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is available at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/default.asp>

The **Dublin Descriptors** for qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are available at:

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/QF-EHEA-May2005.pdf>

⁴ Quoted from 'Credit Level Descriptors for Further and Higher Education', published by SEEC, January 2003