

DEVELOPING THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL
QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (ACQF)



GUIDELINE

02

**Levels and level descriptors
in the context of ACQF**



THE AFRICA-EU PARTNERSHIP
LE PARTENARIAT AFRIQUE-UE



This guideline on levels and level descriptors in the context of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is elaborated on in 2021-2022 within the project AU-EU Skills for Youth Employability/Skills Initiative for Africa, Technical Cooperation – Developing the African Continental Qualifications Framework.

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Table of contents

List of acronyms.....	5
1 Introduction to the level descriptors guideline	1
1.1 PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDELINE.....	3
1.2 GUIDELINE STRUCTURE.....	3
1.3 TARGET USERS.....	3
1.4 OBJECTIVES.....	4
1.5 LINKS BETWEEN THE LEVEL DESCRIPTORS GUIDELINE AND OTHER ACQF GUIDELINES	4
2 Theoretical-conceptual underpinnings of level descriptors	4
2.1 PURPOSE AND BENEFIT OF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS	4
2.2 DEVELOPMENT OF ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS	6
2.3 DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN REGIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL DESCRIPTORS	6
2.4 POLICY BASIS OF THE ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS.....	9
2.4.1 ACQF vision and aspirations.....	10
2.4.2 ACQF principles.....	10
2.4.3 ACQF objectives.....	10
2.4.4 ACQF functions.....	10
2.5 UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES FOR ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTOR DESIGN.....	11
2.5.1 Components of transparency.....	11
2.5.2 Learning outcomes orientation.....	11
2.5.3 Future orientation.....	11
2.5.4 Generic scope.....	12
2.5.5 Developmental and cumulative aspects.....	12
2.5.6 Conceptual and technical clarity	12
2.6 WRITING AND DEFINING ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS	13
2.6.1 Easing implementation of level descriptors	14
2.7 OPTIONS FOR ACQF LEVELS AND DOMAINS.....	14
2.7.1 Options for an ACQF level structure.....	14
2.7.2 Options for ACQF domains of learning.....	16
2.7.3 Options for an ACQF that supports innovation.....	17
3 Recommendations for draft ACQF level descriptors	18
3.1 ACQF DOMAINS AND SUB-DOMAINS.....	18
3.1.1 Knowledge.....	18
3.1.2 Skills	19
3.1.3 Autonomy and responsibility	20
3.2 ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS.....	21

3.3	TESTING AND REFINING THE ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS	23
4	Sources	24
5	Annexes	28
5.1	ANNEX 1: ACQF COMMUNITY OF RQFS WORLDWIDE	28
5.2	ANNEX 2: ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS GLOSSARY	30
5.3	ANNEX 3: ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS BUILDER MATRIX VERSION 5	36

List of acronyms

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AQRF	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
AUMS	AU Member States
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
EAQFHE	East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE)
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ETF	European Training Foundation
EXCO	Executive Committee
HE	Higher education
MS	Member States
NARC	National ACQF Referencing Committee
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQS	National Qualifications System
QA	quality assurance
QF	Qualifications Framework
REC	Regional Economic Community
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RQF	Regional Qualifications Framework
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADCQF	Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework
TCCA	Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

1 Introduction to the level descriptors guideline

The African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is a policy of continental scope to deliver on the objectives of enhanced transparency and comparability of qualifications and mutual trust between qualifications frameworks and systems for lifelong learning in Africa.

The ACQF is defined as a comprehensive common reference qualifications framework of ten levels expressed as learning outcomes, serving as a translation device between different qualifications frameworks or systems and their levels.

Each ACQF level represents learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at that level. The ACQF level descriptors capture how the three domains of knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility (A&R) increase in breadth, depth and complexity when moving from lower to higher levels.

Level descriptors of the ACQF serve complementary purposes: i) basis for referencing of levels of national qualifications frameworks or systems to the ACQF; ii) orientation towards common minimum benchmarks for outcomes of learning on the continent; iii) orientation for countries / regions in developing their qualifications frameworks or systems.

Level descriptors of the African Continental Qualifications Framework

Level	Domains of learning		
	Knowledge	Skills	Autonomy and responsibility
	In the context of ACQF “Knowledge” includes various kinds of knowledge such as facts, principles and theories in various areas	In the context of ACQF “Skills” refer to the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills.	In the context of ACQF “Autonomy and responsibility” refers to the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility
<u>Level 1:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	simple knowledge, literacy and numeracy	simple communication, cognitive and practical skills required to follow simple instructions, and use simple, repetitive solutions to address simple problems	highly structured, repetitive contexts under close supervision and guidance taking minimal responsibility for self
<u>Level 2:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	basic knowledge incorporating comprehension and recall of factual and operational knowledge in some areas	basic communication, cognitive and practical skills required to use concrete information, ideas and known solutions to address straight forward problems	structured contexts under limited supervision and guidance taking limited responsibility for self and group outcomes
<u>Level 3:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	factual and operational knowledge incorporating some theoretical aspects in some areas	a range of communication, cognitive, practical and technical skills required to interpret and communicate ideas and detailed information and select and use known solutions to address familiar problems	predictable contexts under routine supervision and guidance, with initiative for self-responsibility and some responsibility for group outcomes

<u>Level 4:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mainly factual, operational or technical knowledge incorporating theoretical aspects in one or more areas	well-developed technical skills required to analyse information and new ideas, make informed judgements, communicate outcomes and apply varied solutions to varied (familiar and unfamiliar) problems	varied (predictable and unpredictable) contexts with adaptability and initiative for self-direction under general guidance, taking full responsibility for self, some planning and responsibility for group outcomes and initiative for responsibility for others
<u>Level 5:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mainly technical or theoretical knowledge with substantial depth in a discipline/ area	a range of well-developed technical skills, with some specialisation, required to analyse information and new ideas, construct and communicate a coherent argument, and apply a range of solutions, often in combination, to address unfamiliar problems	unpredictable contexts with full autonomy and full responsibility for self and group outcomes, and some responsibility for others
<u>Level 6:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	highly technical or theoretical knowledge, with specialisation in a discipline/ area	highly technical and specialised skills required to collate, analyse, synthesise and communicate a range of information and new ideas, and formulate or adapt different solutions to address complex and sometimes abstract problems	highly variable contexts with well-developed autonomy and responsibility for self and group outcomes and responsibility for resources and processes
<u>Level 7:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	advanced analytical and/ or specialised knowledge of a discipline/ area	advanced, specialised skills required to demonstrate advanced analysis and initiative for new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation, and formulate advanced solutions to address complex and abstract problems	complex and variable contexts with advanced autonomy and responsibility
<u>Level 8:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	highly advanced, complex knowledge of a discipline/ area	highly advanced, complex skills required to demonstrate highly advanced analysis, communicate new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation, and formulate highly advanced solutions to address highly complex and abstract problems	highly complex contexts with some specialisation demonstrating highly advanced autonomy and responsibility
<u>Level 9:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mastery of a complex body of knowledge at the forefront of a discipline/ area	skills mastery required to demonstrate originality and new insights in research and/ or innovation and formulate and test theories to show mastery of highly complex, abstract problems	highly specialised contexts demonstrating mastery in autonomy and responsibility
<u>Level 10:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	substantial and original knowledge contribution that extends the forefront of a discipline/ area and/ or at the	expert skills and techniques that demonstrate innovation, interpretation and creation of new ideas required to critically evaluate, formulate and test theories to address	emergent new contexts demonstrating expertise in management of new ideas

	interface between disciplines/ areas	emergent, new and critical problems	
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1.1 Purpose of this guideline

The purpose of this level descriptors guideline is to clarify and deepen the concept of level descriptors of the ACQF. It also provides technical orientation for national implementing bodies and stakeholders, especially the lead institutions managing the NQF and interacting with the (future) ACQF implementation/steering unit.

This guideline proposes a set of level descriptors for the ACQF, one that makes it possible to compare qualifications levels in terms of learning outcomes, embraces a future-oriented lifelong learning objective, recognises all forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) and covers the whole spectrum of qualifications including general education, TVET and HE.

1.2 Guideline structure

This level descriptors guideline includes a trio of documents: (1) a synthesis guideline, (2) a technical guideline and (3) a training module:

- Technical in-depth guideline: This document forms the core of the trio of documents. It will present as a short handbook: for clarification and technical support. This will be used by implementers, practitioners, and other groups
- Synthesis version: This version is a shortened version for policy purposes. It will be used primarily by policy institutions, and other groups, and has a key purpose to provide policy orientation
- Training module: This version will form part of the knowledge base and be used for the ACQF Training programme and ACQF e-learning platform.

As an ACQF instrument, the level descriptors guideline:

- works in synergy with, and complements, other ACQF guidelines
- refers to the relevant existing (or planned) African Union (AU) policies, instruments and recommendations
- contributes to an AU area of education and qualifications, based on converging elements and recommendations that eventually contribute to continental integration and mutual understanding while respecting the diversity of the national and regional context

1.3 Target users

The main target users of this level descriptors guideline are members or stakeholders of steering groups/implementation groups for the ACQF, as well as NQFs and NQSSs. These include National Referencing Committees/ National Coordination Points and policy advisers involved in education and training.

The ACQF level descriptors provides an important centre of reference for referencing (establishing the link between) the national level descriptors or national qualifications levels to the ACQF levels. The referencing outcomes and implications will be of importance to persons involved in supporting mobility for lifelong learning.

1.4 Objectives

The level descriptors guideline aims to:

- Clarify what is meant by learning outcomes based level descriptors within the ACQF
- Clarify the ACQF level descriptors and what are the related key requirements for countries engaging in referencing their qualifications levels/ level descriptors to the ACQF
- Provide conceptual and technical orientations to countries and regional economic communities (RECs) to support the improvement and consolidation of their own NQs and NQFs and links with the ACQF. This reinforces objective 3 of the ACQF which is to work in cooperation and complementarity with the NQFs
- Generate a set of applicable concepts, principles, criteria and procedures, as well as tools for referencing level descriptors/ qualifications levels to the ACQF
- Contribute to a common understanding of the ACQF level descriptors and application across countries and regions to ease the implementation of the ACQF at continental, national and regional levels
- Present and elaborate on specific tools culminating in an ACQF handbook
- Seek synergy between the level descriptors (based on learning outcomes) and complementarity with already existing AU policies and instruments

1.5 Links between the level descriptors guideline and other ACQF guidelines

The ten ACQF guidelines have a key intention to contribute technical and methodological support to countries participating in the ACQF process.

The level descriptors guideline (Guideline 2) links with the other nine ACQF guidelines and corresponds with the proposed ACQF referencing criteria. All the guidelines have some links to each other whether explicit or implicit. For example:

- The level descriptor guideline links explicitly to Guideline 3: Referencing NQFs / NQS to the ACQF as a key output of the referencing process is to demonstrate the link between national level descriptors/ qualification levels and the ACQF level descriptors
- Guideline 1: Learning Outcomes and Guideline 4: Validation of learning are critical as the level descriptor development follows a learning outcomes approach and also accommodates validation of learning
- Level descriptors are critical to classifying qualifications in an NQF/ NQS and here both Guideline 6 on registration of qualifications and Guideline 9 on inclusion of innovation become important to the conversation
- Quality assurance and trust is a key feature of the ACQF and so is buy-in and communication with stakeholders so Guidelines 5, 7, 8 and 10 are critical to ensure continuous quality and to encourage advocacy and support for the ACQF.

2 Theoretical-conceptual underpinnings of level descriptors

2.1 Purpose and benefit of level descriptors

The ACQF is intended as a common translation instrument that may be used to interpret the various qualifications levels on the African continent. As a common reference point, the ACQF will strengthen Africa's position by improving transparency of qualifications and aligning education and training while ensuring cohesion on the continent.

At the very core of the ACQF are the level descriptors that provide transparent descriptions of the complexities of learning at a specific ACQF level, regardless of how or where this learning occurred. The ACQF level descriptors will facilitate lifelong learning, recognise learning outcomes from all contexts (formal, non-formal and informal), demonstrate innovation-readiness and include aspects that the ACQF wishes to encourage in NQF/ NQs of member countries.

Learning outcomes based level descriptors are essential to any qualifications framework, whether sectoral, national or regional. These level descriptors relate to a specific level and signal the learning outcomes orientation of the Qualifications Framework (QF) being presented. Level descriptors enable the linking of national level descriptors or qualifications levels to the ACQF levels.

The importance of the level descriptors is further strengthened when compared to another set of level descriptors in another framework and the rich information that culminates as a result of the comparison. The referencing of national level descriptors to the ACQF level descriptors will forefront the critical importance of level descriptors in providing an understanding of the member country's qualifications. The ACQF level descriptors not only promote cooperation and referencing between qualifications frameworks (national and regional) in Africa but also worldwide. As seen in Annex 1, the ACQF will form part of a community of 17 RQFs worldwide (African countries participate in eight of these). The ACQF level descriptors become an important tool for African relations and dialogue with other RQFs especially in realising the ACQF strategic priorities including those linked to Agenda 2063, CESA and AfCFTA.

The ACQF will provide the basis for dialogue, reflection and improvements in the QFs in its community, and learning outcomes will be a tool with which to facilitate this communication. Further, just as national level descriptors allow the various sub-sectors and contexts to be coherent and aligned, it also allows the national level to "speak" to the regional level.

Learning outcomes based level descriptors are critical in indicating the complexity of learning at a particular level of a QF and, by their very design, encourage their related systems to be also based on learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are regarded as the "glue" in qualifications frameworks, linking together instruments and policy initiatives. In this way, the learning outcomes based level descriptors will contribute to facilitating policy learning across Africa.

The ACQF respects the sovereignty of its member states and by its very nature encourages dialogue, reflection and improvements in its community. It will have a transformational feature that includes aspects that the ACQF wants to encourage in its community. As a future-oriented mechanism, the ACQF level descriptors responds to innovation-transitions (green, social, digital) and becomes a catalyst for better NQFs/ NQs across the continent.

The ACQF level descriptors enhance transparency, credibility and comparability of African education and qualifications across the world. Since the ACQF is a referencing RQF that incorporates working in complementarity with countries and supporting them to develop their national systems, the ACQF level descriptors will also provide some guidance to the national level.

The purposes of the ACQF level descriptors will extend beyond classification of learning complexity. They will also provide a tool that will:

- allow members to compare learning and strategies across the continent
- offer a coherent picture of NQFs by making information more explicit
- encourage communication and linking of NQF/NQS with the ACQF
- aid the collection of statistical information
- facilitate qualifications reform

Level descriptors exist at both national and regional levels, and although these level descriptors are similar in that they have generic applicability within their contexts, there are differences in national and regional level descriptors.

2.2 Development of ACQF level descriptors

To ascertain transparency and quality of the process, the ACQF level descriptors were developed based on the following principles and steps:

- Reference to global knowledge and practice related to level descriptors in qualifications frameworks (national, regional).
- Reference to the African context
 - o Stocktaking and overview of level descriptors and domains of learning in existing NQFs and RQFs in Africa. Outputs: [ACQF Feasibility Study](#) (2021), [ACQF Thematic Brief 3.1: level descriptors](#) (2020).
 - o Special survey on NQFs, level descriptors and learning outcomes, carried out in August 2021. The findings of the survey informed the proposed domains of learning of ACQF level descriptors.
- Methodological Guidance: developed and published the [Orientation Note on Regional Qualifications Frameworks](#) (2021).
- Practical method for conceptualisation, drafting, review of the ACQF level descriptors:
 - o Expert team: lead author and four contributors and reviewers
 - o Systematic process, based on:
 - Team meetings: focused technical discussion of the gradual building of the concepts, definitions of the domains of learning, terms and verbs. All meetings are documented through video-recordings and brief minutes.
 - The process was documented and supported by a progressive matrix, encapsulating all versions, specific glossary, comments.
 - The advanced draft of the grid of ACQF level descriptors was presented and discussed at a wider internal meeting with all experts.
 - The final draft of the level descriptors was incorporated in the dedicated ACQF Guideline Two and presented for comments to the ACQF Advisory Group meeting, on 13 January 2022. The Guideline was shared with the Advisory Group four weeks before the meeting. All documents for review and debate by the Advisory Group are accessible at the ACQF Intranet.
 - The Advisory Group was invited to provide more substantive comments on all ACQF Guidelines presented at the meeting held on 13 January 2022. A period of 4 weeks was given for this consultation process, administered through a survey. The comments received were incorporated in the draft Guidelines. The proposed draft level descriptors did not receive objections or requests of major modifications.

2.3 Differentiating between regional and national level descriptors

Both NQF/ NQFs and RQFs are social and political tools that create an agreed reference point and multi-stakeholder platform for dialogue. In this regard, both NQFs and RQFs have some similarity but differ (See Table 1) in their different purposes, policy priorities and contexts.

Table 1: Difference between NQF/NQS and ACQF

National QF/ QS	ACQF
Functions as a national benchmark tool for level of learning achieved in the NQF/ NQS considering local, national and regional priorities	Functions as a regional benchmark tool and translation device to compare and interpret qualifications levels across countries within the ACQF region considering collective, cross-border priorities
National levels are populated by national learning outcome statements embedded in general levels of learning complexity in different learning contexts within a country	ACQF levels are populated by regional learning outcome statements embedded in general levels of learning complexity across all contexts and countries
Developed by national governments, agencies or authorities to increase coherence of sub-systems	Developed by regional ACQF body represented by member countries to bring together a community of countries
Quality is indicated by nationally agreed QA practices, policy and procedures	Quality is indicated by regional QA guidelines, transparent QA systems and commonly applied referencing criteria
Success relies on relevance and compliance and buy-in from relevant stakeholders	Success relies on agreement and trust between member countries

The drafting of the ACQF level descriptors is a consultative process that requires a pragmatic approach, guided by the vision and objectives of the African Union’s policies regarding education and skills from one side; and the findings from comparative analysis of a range of national and regional qualifications frameworks from the other. This first draft proposal is the result of an intensive and participative process of construction of ACQF level descriptors. Consultation and discussion with the wider stakeholders’ community is part of the process and will be completed by tests of comparison of ACQF level descriptors with descriptors of NQFs and RQFs.

- At national level:
 - Descriptors are typically developed by national governments, agencies or authorities and quality is agreed by adhering to national quality assurance specifications and agreement. Their success depends on their perceived value and buy-in from stakeholders.

The learning outcomes of the ACQF level descriptors must be fit for its purpose and will differ from learning outcomes in national level descriptors/ qualification levels. As a meta-RQF, reference point and a translation device, the ACQF will have no qualifications registered onto it and have no links to national qualifications/ qualification types. ACQF level descriptors reflect the nature and scope of the ACQF and respond to the collective, regional priorities and goals across the number of member countries.

- At national level:
 - The purpose of national level descriptors is to indicate the allocation of a national qualification to a particular level on an NQF. As a benchmark for levels of learning achievement recognised in the NQF/NQS, they reflect the nature and scope of the NQF, what is important to a nation and what should be reflected in the qualifications. They are linked to political visions, address national needs and priorities and are typically products of wide consultation between relevant stakeholders. National level descriptors signal transparency and are at the heart of development of qualifications frameworks.

The ACQF level descriptors are formulated as generic, broad statements of learning outcomes that can accommodate and value all forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) and can be applied across all AU countries and all education and training sectors. They signify the levels of learning complexity at a continental level, and identify a general, central regional reference point. ACQF level descriptors enable NQFs/ NQSS to relate to each other within the ACQF. As a regional meta-framework and translation device, the ACQF level descriptors are brief and generalised. They deliberately use a general language, and will not

capture the same complexities that are evident in national level descriptors. However, they are structured by learning domains, which are commonly found in the NQFs of many participating member states, e.g.: Knowledge, Skills and Autonomy and Responsibility.

- At national level:
 - The key purpose is to guide the process of allocating qualifications, part-qualifications, and possibly other kinds of learning and credentials to levels in the framework. The descriptor statements assist to indicate the location of a particular qualification on a specific level and has more detailed descriptors that offer sufficient scope to classify new qualifications, or enable the placement of existing ones. They provide a common language and general reference point to enable differentiation of learning achievement across levels in a country.
 - If the NQF purpose is to support lifelong learning by including all types of learning, one comprehensive set of level descriptors, that spans all levels and sectors of the national system, will be developed. The statements describe the complexity of learning in qualifications/ qualification types and are often linked to features of existing qualifications. However, they are sufficiently general to accommodate all sectors and types of qualifications.
 - A QF with a more restrictive objective, such as a sectoral QF (HE or TVET) will tend to be described with less generic and more specialised descriptors. National level descriptors are often referred to as levels of learning progression and give an indication of the generic complexity that should be developed by all qualifications at all levels. The positioning of two or more qualifications on the same NQF level indicates that the qualifications are broadly comparable in terms of generic complexity at that level of the NQF, regardless of where or how the qualification was obtained.
 - Level descriptors are formulated as national learning outcomes statements that describe what a learner should know, understand and do after completing a learning process. Since they incorporate learning outcomes into their design, they also encourage national qualifications to be based on learning outcomes. At national level, the learning outcome statements used to describe qualification frameworks levels, qualification standards, curricula and assessment criteria will be aligned to ensure coherence. The qualification descriptors provide more detailed information on the purpose and nature of the qualification. Access to learning is guided by linkages between qualifications and further guided by recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) processes. In this regard national level descriptors act as a reference for comparability and validation of learning and make it possible to recognise learning that takes place outside the formal system.
 - Level descriptors must ensure coherence in learning achievement in the allocation of qualifications to particular levels and provide clear indications of the areas where evidence should be provided to prove that qualifications confirm the relevant knowledge, understanding, skills and other capacities linked with qualifications levels. To ensure that level descriptors are trusted, the procedures for classifying qualifications at a particular NQF level should be agreed, transparent and quality-assured with clear roles of participants and stakeholders.
 - Level descriptors differ from, yet provide a scaffold/ broad direction for, the development of more specific learning outcomes in qualification types, curriculum content and/ or assessment standards. The increased transparency and support for recognition depends on how they align with learning outcomes in qualification standards, curricula and assessment arrangements. They help learners, education and training providers, and employers to position a specific qualification in relation to other qualifications awarded in the same country or in another country.

- NQFs serve a particular country's purpose. Even if two countries have the same number of NQF levels on their NQF, these cannot be interpreted as similar in complexity, unless confirmed through an alignment/ comparison activity, nor can the same levels of complexity be interpreted and applied in the same way. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that the same qualification type in one NQF is similar to or applied in the same way as that in another NQF.
- They act as a guide to, amongst others:
 - Classify qualifications on an appropriate NQF level
 - Define and write learning outcomes and assessment criteria for qualifications
 - Assist with recognising prior learning at an appropriate NQF level
 - Align specific jobs with NQF registered qualifications
 - Award professional designations
- It is important that the right balance be found between the descriptive and prescriptive nature of level descriptors:
 - They are descriptive in guiding learning at a particular NQF level
 - They are prescriptive in the development and allocation of qualifications to a NQF

The ACQF level descriptors are presented as a matrix defining and clarifying the vertical and horizontal logic of the ACQF as a comprehensive framework that encompasses all types and levels of qualifications. To encourage the implementation of the ACQF level descriptors, it is important that there is alignment and coherence across the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the ACQF. The vertical dimension represents levels of learning complexity, usually hierarchical, from lower to higher levels with enough detail to differentiate levels. They show how learning increases in complexity, breadth and depth when moving from lower to higher levels on the ACQF. The horizontal dimension represents the domains and sub-domains of learning. Both horizontal and vertical interplay informs the level of complexity.

- At national level:
 - The logic of national level descriptors is based on the same vertical and horizontal dimensions of logic as the ACQF.
 - The learning outcomes of the national level descriptors must be fit for purpose, coherent and aligned across the domains and levels. At a national level, descriptors need to be specifically detailed to capture the complexities of the national system. Any decision on the number and construction (domains or sub-domains) of the NQF's levels of learning complexity must be guided by the needs of the country's qualifications system. They need to be able to reflect the domains and sub-domains of learning (horizontal dimension) and the increase in complexity from lower to higher levels (vertical dimension). However, countries may have different names for domains and sub-domains, and the number of levels may differ.

2.4 Policy basis of the ACQF Level descriptors

The ACQF has a key responsibility to support the AU to achieve the continental objectives formulated in CESA-25, the Ten Years Implementation Plan of Agenda 2063, the AU Free Movement Protocol and AfCFTA. The development of learning outcomes based level descriptors is closely linked to the realisation of the objectives of the various continental initiatives to establish an ACQF, and means that learning outcomes play a governing role in education and training at a continental level. The conceptual underpinnings and technical basis of the ACQF level descriptors need to reflect the objectives and broad features of the ACQF.

Learning outcomes based level descriptors is a key feature of the ACQF, alongside its purpose and scope, quality assurance criteria and governance arrangements. An outcome of this guideline is a set of level descriptors for the ACQF. It is therefore important to situate the conversation in the vision and aspirations

of the ACQF. It is the purpose, scope and underpinning principles of the ACQF that will influence the development of level descriptors and the decision around the number of levels and domains of level descriptors.

The next sub-sections reiterate the purpose, scope and underpinning principles of the ACQF that have already been elaborated on in other documents (ACQF, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

2.4.1 ACQF vision and aspirations

The idea of mutual understanding and recognition of education and establishing a Continental Qualifications Framework for Africa was expressed in a number of strategic initiatives to integrate the African continent including:

- The African Union's (AU's) First Ten-Year Implementation Plan of Agenda 2063 (2014–2023)
- The AU Free Movement Protocol and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) (2016–2025)
- The Agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), in its Protocol on Trade in Services, which mentions mutual recognition of education.

2.4.2 ACQF principles

The ACQF is envisioned as an overarching qualifications framework for the continent, based on the principles of:

- Inclusiveness of all types of learning and levels of qualifications (all sub-systems of education and training),
- Openness to learners' and stakeholders' needs, to policy learning and lessons from other qualifications frameworks, and
- Innovation-readiness: notably to the transformation of skills and learning in the context of digitalisation, greening and beyond Covid-19 reconstruction.

2.4.3 ACQF objectives

The objectives of the envisioned ACQF are to:

- Enhance comparability, quality and transparency of qualifications and support to people's lifelong learning,
- Facilitate recognition of skills, diplomas and certificates, and support mobility (learners, workers, businesses),
- Work in cooperation and complementarity with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQFs) and support the creation of an African education and qualifications space, and
- Promote cooperation, alignment/referencing between qualifications frameworks (national and regional) in Africa and worldwide.

2.4.4 ACQF functions

The ACQF will function as:

- An overarching framework against which national and regional frameworks and level descriptors can be calibrated
- A referencing qualifications framework that will allow:
 - linking of levels and referencing between NQFs and the ACQF,

- comparison with other international frameworks
- A catalyst for development of NQFs and their instruments.

2.5 Underpinning principles for ACQF level descriptor design

The ACQF level descriptors will play a key role in referencing between the ACQF and qualifications levels in the NQFs/ NQs of member states. An understanding of the underpinning learning outcomes and domains of learning used in the ACQF level descriptors will assist in deepening understanding of the referencing processes between countries and the ACQF. Certain key principles describing the following aspects will be considered in its regional design and coherence:

- Components of transparency
- Learning outcomes orientation
- Future orientation
- Generic scope and formulation
- Developmental and cumulative aspects
- Conceptual and technical clarity, based on a defined development method

2.5.1 Components of transparency

The ACQF level descriptors support the purpose of the ACQF and will encompass all components of transparency of an agreed and credible reference point which include:

- A learning outcomes orientation
- Validation of learning from all contexts whether formal, non-formal or informal
- Placement of qualifications in NQF levels and related registers
- Quality assurance of qualifications and NQFs
- Stakeholder participation and endorsement

2.5.2 Learning outcomes orientation

The ACQF level descriptors will encourage a learning outcomes orientation, and facilitate lifelong learning and the recognition of learning outcomes from all contexts (formal, non-formal and informal).

The ACQF learning outcomes based level descriptors will be an independent reference point and be fit-for-purpose.

All forms of learning outcomes will be included in the ACQF, irrespective of the learning context or institutional context.

The learning outcomes of the ACQF level descriptors will be coherent and aligned across all levels and all domains of learning.

2.5.3 Future orientation

The learning outcomes of the ACQF level descriptors will demonstrate future-orientation and innovation-readiness.

The ACQF level descriptors need to reflect an optimistic vision of the future of the African economy and must not only encourage the skills needed to rebuild the present but also leverage the future skills that will advance innovation (green or environmental, digital, social).

Although the ACQF level descriptors will respect national sovereignty and will not require changes to NQFs/NQSs, the level descriptors will include future-oriented aspects that the ACQF wishes to encourage in the NQFs/ NQSs of its member countries.

A future-oriented ACQF acknowledges new trends in qualifications and areas of learning and attempts to encourage resilience, active learning, critical thinking, creativity, cognitive flexibility and emotional intelligence.

2.5.4 Generic scope

The learning outcomes level descriptors of the ACQF level must be understood as broad statements of outcomes of learning complexity with no direct relationship to qualifications/ qualification types.

They will be generic in scope to accommodate all types of learning.

The generic nature of the ACQF level descriptors means that they will not capture the complexities of an NQF/NQS. This means that they will not be sector-specific nor will they exclude specific learner groups through the use of language or implied contexts.

The ACQF level descriptors deliberately use general language and are neutral/ content free although they will be explicit in defining domains and sub-domains.

The ACQF needs to have the right balance between the wider generic scope of its level descriptors and the future-orientation agency it proposes.

2.5.5 Developmental and cumulative aspects

Each successive ACQF level will be cumulative and imply a higher level of complexity of learning from lower to higher levels. This means that:

- There should be an agreed understanding and degree of comparability on the levels of complexity across domains and sub-domains (both vertical and horizontal dimensions)
- Each level should build on the lower levels and encompass all the previous levels. However, it is not necessary to have a clear build across all levels of a particular domain or sub-domain; some domains or sub-domains may be built over a lesser number of levels
- There should be adequate distinction between the descriptors of lower and higher levels. Duplication of effort should be avoided

2.5.6 Conceptual and technical clarity

Conceptual and technical clarity and consistency will ease understanding and application of the ACQF level descriptors.

- While keeping in mind the strategic priorities of the continent, an over-complicated, highly detailed framework of level descriptors is not desirable. For this reason, ACQF domains will be kept to a minimum
- The level descriptors will be as simple, brief and general as possible to facilitate clarity and ease of application of the level descriptors
- Each domain and sub-domain will have clear definitions
- Descriptions will be concrete and definite in nature. This means avoiding vague words such as narrow, broad, good or appropriate
- Only positive, clear, specific statements will be used in the level descriptors
- The language will be transparent for the non-expert reader. This means it will be jargon-free and non-technical.

2.6 Writing and defining ACQF level descriptors

There is no single unique way of approaching level descriptor development but there is a large body of knowledge, building on the experiences of over 150 countries and 17 meta / regional qualifications frameworks and initiatives.

Different theoretical and conceptual approaches directly influence the design and application of learning outcomes for different purposes and in different contexts. Learning outcomes approaches are often harshly criticised for either being too narrow or too broad. This tension derives from the conceptual roots of learning outcomes approaches which are embedded in two very different schools of thought: behaviourism and constructivism.

- **Behaviourism:** There is a general expectation that learning outcomes should be measurable. Behaviourists emphasise learning outcomes that are full-ended, result-oriented, clearly observable and measurable and seem to have had a stronger influence on definitions of level descriptors (focus on observable behaviour).
- **Constructivism:** Not all forms and routes of learning can be described in terms of measurable learning outcomes and therefore cannot be reported objectively. Constructivists contrast with the behaviourist view and assert that learning outcomes must be open-ended, process-oriented with limited measurability.

Other theorists have developed, discusses and revised taxonomies of learning, including that knowledge is arranged from factual through to metacognitive knowledge. Skills/ performance levels grow in complexity when mastering tasks and progresses through levels from novice to expert.

The conceptual approaches applied to the level descriptor development must be fit for purpose and may require a combination of different conceptual approaches. In developing ACQF and national level descriptors, the strengths and complementarity of both behaviourist and constructivist theories, rather than the tensions, is considered.

The formulation of level descriptors is not a neutral activity but requires reflection on the specific purposes. The descriptors used by a RQF or NQF differ significantly in detail from those used in a qualification standard, a qualification description, a curriculum or an assessment standard.

ACQF/ regional level descriptors

The ACQF, as a meta-framework requires brief, general outcomes based level descriptors. Overly detailed and over-complicated statements will prevent countries from relating to the statements.

The complexity of descriptors will vary:

- Simpler statements at lower levels of the framework
- Certain key ideas present at most levels
- Different details of complexity at each level.

National level descriptors

At national level, the descriptors take the form of learning outcome statements with a set number of descriptions. Typically, outcome statements are verb-driven:

- Start with the words similar to: "The individual can..."
- Include an active verb/ combination of verbs/ verbal phrase
- Include an object/ objective
- Include context (one or more indicators of quality or scope)

2.6.1 Easing implementation of level descriptors

Implementation of learning outcomes based level descriptors can be challenging.

Understanding the role, concepts, vertical and horizontal logic of NQF level descriptors is fundamental, and should be a theme in every teacher training programme, in the curricula of pedagogical institutes and in relevant capacity development programmes promoted by ministries, NQF institutions and curriculum development projects. Level descriptors are a fundamental link between the NQF and vast system of learning, teaching and certification..

To ease use and application, these level descriptors should:

- Be detailed enough to capture the complexities of an NQF/ RQF
- Be general enough to accommodate different parts of the qualifications systems
- Be suitable for all contexts (not too academic, theoretical and wordy)
- Explain the logic of the domains, sub-domains and levels preferably with an accompanying glossary
- Be consistently applied in countries
- Be made visible and accessible to users through training, capacity building, workshops, information sessions
- Capture the balance between being prescriptive and being descriptive.

2.7 Options for ACQF levels and domains

This section draws on the key lessons learnt from the mapping study, the feasibility study, sharing in the peer learning webinars (PLWs), ACQF thematic briefs (especially Brief 3.1 on level descriptors), lessons learnt from other RQFs and the results of a brief ACQF survey on learning outcomes and level descriptors.

A key question in the ACQF development is how many levels and what domains should the ACQF have. The response depends on a range of factors and the outcome of discussions and consensus of the ACQF community of countries. In addition, the drafting of the ACQF level descriptors requires some understanding and mapping of the NQF landscape and level descriptors of countries within the ACQF context. Furthermore, the conceptual underpinnings and technical basis of the ACQF level descriptors should reflect the objectives and broad features of the ACQF.

2.7.1 Options for an ACQF level structure

It is recommended that a ten-level QF is appropriate for the ACQF.

Rationale:

The ACQF serves a community of 55 members, and must accommodate and enable countries to reference their qualifications levels. The number of levels of complexity and domains of the level descriptors for the ACQF should reflect its underpinning purpose of bringing together its community of countries. In this regard:

- Too few levels may result in too many qualifications levels/ NQF levels referenced to one ACQF level
- Too many levels may lead to underuse of an ACQF level in the referencing process

In the ACQF environment there is a diversity of level structures ranging from 5 to 10 level NQF/ RQFs. A ten-level ACQF will accommodate this range of NQFs/ RQFs in Africa.

The various reports and tools of the ACQF identified 27 QFs in development in Africa (Table 4). Of these 27 QF developments:

- 21 are comprehensive QFs:
 - 15 are 10-level NQFs
 - 5 are 8-level NQFs
 - 1 is a 7-level NQF
- 4 are sectoral QFs:
 - 2 are 6-level TVET QFs
 - 2 are 5-level QFs. Of these 1 is a TVET QF and 1 is a higher education QF
- 2 are RQFs. Of these:
 - 1 is a comprehensive 10-level RQF
 - 1 is an 8-level sectoral QF for higher education

Table 2: NQF developments in Africa

QFs levels	No	Countries/ regions
NQFs		
NQF: 10 levels	15	12 in SADC (Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe). Countries from other regions: Kenya, The Gambia and Rwanda ¹
NQF: 8 levels	5	Cape Verde, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Morocco
NQF : 7 levels	1	Tunisia
Sector QF: 6 levels	2	Nigeria (TVET), Uganda (TVET)
Sector QF: 5 levels	2	Senegal (TVET), Tanzania (HE)
RQFs		
RQF: 10 levels	1	Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF)
RQF: 8 levels	1	East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE)
	27	TOTAL

As shown in Table 2, 60% of member countries/ regions covered by this ACQF research have a predominance of ten-level QFs (15 NQFs and 1 RQF), even though these 10-level NQFs are mainly established within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which has a 10-level RQF (SADCQF) influencing the technical-conceptual design of the NQFs in the region.

Moreover, six SADC countries are also members of the 10-level VUSSC TQF (Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles).

In Africa, the ten-level SADCQF is the only RQF that has initiated a referencing process, and three countries have completed referencing² (Mauritius, Seychelles and South Africa). The experiences can assist other countries with referencing.

In addition, the results of the ACQF survey on learning outcomes and level descriptors conducted in September 2021 also showed that more than 50% of survey respondents indicated that a 10-level ACQF will be suitable for the region.

Furthermore, a 10-level ACQF will ease comparability and referencing with the range of levels in other global RQF initiatives. A 2021 study conducted by the European Training Foundation (ETF) found 17 RQF

¹ Rwanda: the original NQF was an eight-level framework. The new “Rwanda Qualifications Framework” adopted in 2021 (Official Gazette n° Special 20/10/2021) has a ten-level structure.

² In the context of SADCQF the used term is “alignment”.

initiatives across the globe, including the two QFs in Europe and identified that in the global space, there is a predominance of 10-level RQFs.

It is important to note that even if two QFs being compared have the same number of levels, this does not mean that each of these levels can be interpreted as similar in complexity (unless confirmed through an alignment activity) or that the same levels of complexity are interpreted and applied the same way in both QFs.

It cannot be assumed that a qualification type in one NQF is similar to or applied in the same way as that in another NQF.

2.7.2 Options for ACQF domains of learning

Many of the African countries have already developed level descriptors, and common learning domains have already been identified. Following the results of ACQF survey carried out in September 2021, and the analysis it is recommended that the ACQF classification of learning outcomes be based on three domains of learning namely:

- | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Knowledge2 Skills3 Autonomy and responsibility |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Rationale:

One of the principles of the ACQF is to be open to learning from other practices, and considers lessons from relevant contexts including African experiences.

The learning outcomes in the ACQF may reflect some or all domains of the NQFs participating in its space. The range of level descriptors captured in the various reports of the ACQF (mapping study, feasibility study, thematic briefs) showed some diversity but a predominance of certain domain names namely *Agency, Attitudes, Attributes, Autonomy, Autonomy and responsibility, Competence, Creativity, Independence, Knowledge, Responsibility, Skills, and Values*.

These 13 domains of learning were included in a short survey where respondents were asked to prioritise these for the ACQF level descriptors. The survey results showed that the top five prioritised domains of learning are *Knowledge, Skills, Competence, Autonomy and responsibility, and Responsibility*. This recommendation suggests that only three domains be used, in line with the principles outlined earlier and that the “Competence” domain name be replaced with “Autonomy and Responsibility”. The reason being that competence is an umbrella term that covers all learning and typically includes autonomy and responsibility.

A study of five RQFs (ETF, 2021b) identified that domains of learning are universally described as knowledge and skills with a third more contentious domain: application, competence, autonomy, responsibility:

- The AQRF includes *knowledge and skills, and application and responsibility*
- The EQF includes *knowledge, skills, and responsibility and autonomy*
- The PRQS/PQF includes *knowledge and skills, and application and autonomy*
- The SADCQF includes *knowledge, skills, and autonomy and responsibility*
- The TQF VUSSC includes *knowledge and understanding, skills and wider personal and professional competences*

At this point, it is important to note that even if two QFs being compared have the same number and domain names, this does not mean that the definitions of each of these levels can be interpreted as similar (unless confirmed through a referencing exercise).

The recommendation also considers the EQF debate on the issue of “competence” vs “autonomy and responsibility”.

- The original design of the EQF (Recommendation of 2008) adopted the term “*Competence*” for the third domain of learning, but described it as “*Responsibility and autonomy*”³. The adoption of “*Competence*” represented a negotiated solution, based on extensive discussions with EQF Advisory Group members and experts. In the development of EQF descriptors, agreement related to “*knowledge*” and “*skills*” descriptors were reached at an early stage but it was harder to agree on the naming of the third domain. One group of EQF stakeholders held the notion of “competence” as an overarching category that refers to the ability of individuals to apply knowledge and skills. Another group had a different idea and were using “*competence*” as a separate domain that focuses on specific aspects such as communication, problem-solving and teamwork.
- The revision of the EQF ten years later (Recommendation of 2017) offered the possibility to replace “Competence” with “Responsibility and Autonomy”. This change reflected the positions of the EQF countries and stakeholders united in the EQF Advisory Group, and the implementation experience since the initial EQF legal basis of 2008.

2.7.3 Options for an ACQF that supports innovation

The ACQF has a key responsibility to support the AU to achieve the continental objectives formulated in CESA-25, the Ten Year Implementation Plan of Agenda 2063, AU Free Movement Protocol and AfCFTA and the Ten Year Implementation Plan calls for a Skills Revolution.

As part of the skills revolution of Agenda 2063, the ACQF level descriptors need to reflect an optimistic vision of the future of the African economy, jobs and competences and must not only encourage the skills needed to rebuild the present but also leverage the future skills that will advance innovation (green or environmental, digital, social).

Innovation may be related with new types of qualifications and wider opening up to RPL. The AUMS and regions cooperating with the ACQF are invited to consider, include and/or develop skills for the digital and green transitions in their qualifications, and other transversal skills for the 21st Century. These aspects are further developed in Guideline 9.

In this context, the ACQF as a policy instrument is not only for referencing and transparency, but also to support change and innovation, in a realistic manner, considering the national and regional diversity and features.

An innovation-ready ACQF

An innovation-ready ACQF must encourage resilience, active learning, critical thinking, creativity, cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence and acknowledge new trends in qualifications and areas of learning.

This implies that the level descriptors must be aware of the ongoing transformation of learning, be open to new types of qualifications and credentials, and new and better skill sets, concepts and instruments (such as micro-credentials and digital technologies).

³ “In the context of EQF competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy”. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008H0506\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008H0506(01)&from=EN)

The ACQF level descriptors are developed in an era where all citizens, countries and regions are recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic while simultaneously embracing a future-oriented (social, ecological, technological and digital) transition. The ACQF level descriptors can use the opportunity to accelerate change for the greater good.

This also means that the ACQF needs to find the right balance between the wider generic scope of level descriptors of RQFs and the agency it must propose in terms of innovation and future-orientation.

In considering the design of domains for the ACQF, a skills sub-domain could be created to accommodate “transversal” skills that may relate to civic, social, environment and digital aspects.

3 Recommendations for draft ACQF level descriptors

The ACQF is a 10-level qualifications framework comprising three domains of learning for knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility.

3.1 ACQF domains and sub-domains

ACQF level descriptors reflect and capture how knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility (A&R) increases in breadth, depth and complexity when moving from lower to higher levels

3.1.1 Knowledge

"Knowledge" includes facts, principles and theories in various areas. The learning outcomes at all ten ACQF levels relate to formal, non-formal and informal learning. The knowledge domain comprises two sub-domains or elements:

- Type of knowledge
- Scope of knowledge

Table 3: Vertical logic in the knowledge domain

The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at these levels include:	Knowledge domain		
	Level	scope	
	Level 1	simple knowledge, literacy and numeracy	
	Level 2	basic knowledge incorporating comprehension and recall of factual and operational knowledge	in some areas
	Level 3	factual and operational knowledge incorporating some theoretical aspects	in some areas
	Level 4	mainly factual, operational or technical knowledge incorporating theoretical aspects	in one or more areas
	Level 5	mainly technical or theoretical knowledge with substantial depth	in a discipline/ area
	Level 6	highly technical or theoretical knowledge, with specialisation	in a discipline/ area
	Level 7	advanced analytical, and/ or specialised knowledge	of a discipline/ area
	Level 8	highly advanced, complex knowledge	of a discipline/ area
Level 9	mastery of a complex body of knowledge	at the forefront of a discipline/ area	

	Level 10	substantial and original knowledge contribution	that extends the forefront of a discipline/ area and/ or at the interface between disciplines/ areas
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Type of knowledge

As shown in Table 3, progression in complexity in type of knowledge grows from *simple at Level 1 to mainly technical or theoretical knowledge with substantial depth at Level 5 to substantial and original at Level 10.*

Scope

Scope complexity (Table 3) grows from *Level 2 in some areas to in a discipline/ area at Level 5 to that extends the forefront/ at the interface between fields at Level 10.*

3.1.2 Skills

“Skills” refer to the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems/ issues. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills. The learning outcomes at all ten ACQF levels relate to formal, non-formal and informal learning. The skills domain comprises three sub-domains:

- Type of skills required
- How the skills are used to respond to information
- How the skills are used to address types of problems

Table 4: Vertical logic in the skills domain

The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at these levels include:	Level	Skills domain		
		Type of skills	Response to information	Addressing type of problems
	Level 1	simple communication, cognitive and practical skills	follow simple instructions	use simple repetitive solutions to address simple problems
	Level 2	basic communication, cognitive and practical skills	use concrete information and ideas	use known solutions to address straightforward problems
	Level 3	a range of communication, cognitive, practical and technical skills	interpret and communicate ideas and detailed information	select and use known solutions to address familiar problems
	Level 4	well-developed technical skills	analyse information and ideas, make informed judgements and communicate outcomes	apply varied solutions to address varied (familiar and unfamiliar) problems
	Level 5	a range of well-developed technical skills with some specialisation	analyse information and new ideas and construct and communicate coherent arguments	apply a range of solutions often in combination to address unfamiliar problems
	Level 6	highly technical and specialised skills	collate, analyse, synthesise and communicate a range of information and new ideas	formulate or adapt different solutions to address complex and sometimes abstract problems

	Level 7	advanced skills	demonstrate advanced analysis and initiative for new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation	formulate advanced solutions to address complex and abstract problems
	Level 8	highly advanced, complex skills	demonstrate highly advanced analysis and communicate new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation	formulate highly advanced solutions to address highly complex and abstract problems
	Level 9	mastery	demonstrate originality and new insights in research and/ or innovation	formulate and test theories to show mastery of highly complex, abstract problems
	Level 10	expert skills and techniques	demonstrate innovation, interpretation and creation of emergent and new ideas	critically evaluate, formulate and test theories to address emergent, new and critical problems

Type of skills

Complexity in types of skills (Table 4) progresses from *simple communication, cognitive and practical skills at Level 1 to a range of well-developed technical skills with some specialisation at Level 5 to expert skills and techniques at Level 10.*

Response to information

As shown in Table 4, Response to information progresses in complexity from *following simple instructions at Level 1 to analysing information and new ideas and constructing and communicating coherent arguments at Level 5 to innovation, interpretation and creation of emergent and new ideas at Level 10.*

Addressing types of problems

Complexity in addressing types of problems (Table 4) progresses from *using simple repetitive solutions for simple problems at Level 1 to applying a range of solutions often in combination for unfamiliar problems at Level 5 to critically evaluating, formulating and testing theories for emergent, new and critical problems at Level 10.*

3.1.3 Autonomy and responsibility

“Autonomy and responsibility” (A&R) refers to the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility. The learning outcomes at all ten ACQF levels relate to formal, non-formal and informal learning. The A&R domain comprises three sub-domains:

- the context in which autonomy and responsibility is applied
- the extent to which autonomy is applied
- the extent to which responsibility is applied. Responsibility has three elements: self, group outcomes and resources

Table 5: Vertical logic in the autonomy and responsibility domain

		Autonomy and responsibility domain
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The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at these levels include:	Level	Context	Autonomy	Responsibility
	Level 1	highly structured, repetitive contexts	close supervision and guidance	minimal responsibility for self
	Level 2	structured contexts	limited supervision and guidance	limited responsibility for self and group outcomes
	Level 3	predictable contexts	routine supervision and guidance and initiative for adaptability	initiative for self-responsibility and some responsibility for group outcomes
	Level 4	varied (predictable and unpredictable) contexts	adaptability and initiative for self-direction under general guidance	full self- responsibility, some planning and responsibility for group outcomes and initiative for responsibility for others
	Level 5	unpredictable contexts	full autonomy	full responsibility for self and group outcomes and some responsibility for others
	Level 6	highly variable contexts	well-developed autonomy	well-developed responsibility for self and group outcomes; responsibility for resources and processes
	Level 7	complex and variable contexts	advanced autonomy	advanced
	Level 8	highly complex contexts with some specialisation	highly advanced autonomy	highly advanced
	Level 9	highly specialised contexts	mastery of autonomy	mastery
	Level 10	emergent, new contexts	expertise	expertise in management of new ideas

Context

Context grows in complexity (Table 5) from *highly structured and repetitive at Level 1* to *unpredictable at Level 5* to *emergent, new contexts at Level 10*.

Autonomy

Application of Autonomy grows in complexity (Table 5) from *close supervision and guidance at Level 1* to *full autonomy at Level 5* to *expertise at Level 10*.

Responsibility

Application of responsibility grows in complexity (Table 5) from *minimal responsibility for self at Level 1* to *full responsibility (self and group outcomes)/ initiative for responsibility for others at Level 5* to *expertise in management of new ideas at Level 10*.

3.2 ACQF level descriptors

The full draft of the ACQF level descriptors is shown in Table 6.

Table 6: ACQF level descriptors

Level	Knowledge	Skills	Autonomy and responsibility
	In the context of ACQF “Knowledge” includes various kinds of knowledge such as facts, principles and theories in various areas	In the context of ACQF “Skills” refer to the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills.	In the context of ACQF “Autonomy and responsibility” refers to the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility
<u>Level 1:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	simple knowledge, literacy and numeracy	Simple communication, cognitive and practical skills required to follow simple instructions, and use simple, repetitive solutions to address simple problems	highly structured, repetitive contexts under close supervision and guidance taking minimal responsibility for self
<u>Level 2:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	basic knowledge incorporating comprehension and recall of factual and operational knowledge in some areas	basic communication, cognitive and practical skills required to use concrete information, ideas and known solutions to address straight forward problems	structured contexts under limited supervision and guidance taking limited responsibility for self and group outcomes
<u>Level 3:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	factual and operational knowledge incorporating some theoretical aspects in some areas	a range of communication, cognitive, practical and technical skills required to interpret and communicate ideas and detailed information and select and use known solutions to address familiar problems	predictable contexts under routine supervision and guidance, with initiative for self-responsibility and some responsibility for group outcomes
<u>Level 4:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mainly factual, operational or technical knowledge incorporating theoretical aspects in one or more areas	well-developed technical skills required to analyse information and new ideas, make informed judgements, communicate outcomes and apply varied solutions to varied (familiar and unfamiliar) problems	varied (predictable and unpredictable) contexts with adaptability and initiative for self-direction under general guidance, taking full responsibility for self, some planning and responsibility for group outcomes and initiative for responsibility for others
<u>Level 5:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mainly technical or theoretical knowledge with substantial depth in a discipline/ area	a range of well-developed technical skills, with some specialisation, required to analyse information and new ideas, construct and communicate a coherent argument, and apply a range of solutions, often in combination, to address unfamiliar problems	unpredictable contexts with full autonomy and full responsibility for self and group outcomes, and some responsibility for others
<u>Level 6:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and	highly technical or theoretical knowledge, with	highly technical and specialised skills required to collate, analyse, synthesise and communicate a range of	highly variable contexts with well-developed autonomy and responsibility for self and group outcomes and

informal learning at this level include:	specialisation in a discipline/ area	information and new ideas, and formulate or adapt different solutions to address complex and sometimes abstract problems	responsibility for resources and processes
<u>Level 7:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	advanced analytical and/ or specialised knowledge of a discipline/ area	advanced, specialised skills required to demonstrate advanced analysis and initiative for new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation, and formulate advanced solutions to address complex and abstract problems	complex and variable contexts with advanced autonomy and responsibility
<u>Level 8:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	highly advanced, complex knowledge of a discipline/ area	highly advanced, complex skills required to demonstrate highly advanced analysis, communicate new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation, and formulate highly advanced solutions to address highly complex and abstract problems	highly complex contexts with some specialisation demonstrating highly advanced autonomy and responsibility
<u>Level 9:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mastery of a complex body of knowledge at the forefront of a discipline/ area	skills mastery required to demonstrate originality and new insights in research and/ or innovation and formulate and test theories to show mastery of highly complex, abstract problems	highly specialised contexts demonstrating mastery in autonomy and responsibility
<u>Level 10:</u> the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	substantial and original knowledge contribution that extends the forefront of a discipline/ area and/ or at the interface between disciplines/ areas	expert skills and techniques that demonstrate innovation, interpretation and creation of new ideas required to critically evaluate, formulate and test theories to address emergent, new and critical problems	emergent new contexts demonstrating expertise in management of new ideas

3.3 Testing and refining the ACQF level descriptors

As part of the ACQF development process, the proposed level descriptors will be tested. The purpose would be to test the descriptors, deepen the understanding of level descriptors based on learning outcomes and also test the AU MS response in this situation. The valuable experience that will be gained during the testing and piloting phase will be used to revise and improve the level descriptors.

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5 Annexes

5.1 Annex 1: ACQF community of RQFs worldwide

No	Global community of RQFs	Participating countries
1	African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)	Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara), São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
2	Arab Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (AQF; ANQAHE model)	Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Oman, U.A.E., Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan
3	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRf)	Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos (the Lao People's Democratic Republic), Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam
4	CARICOM Qualifications Framework (CQF)	<i>Full members:</i> Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago.
5	Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement supérieur/ The African and Malagasy Council for Tertiary Education (CAMES)	Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal and Togo.
6	ECOWAS Regional Qualifications Framework of West Africa	Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo
7	East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE)	Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda
8	European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	Albania, Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom (UK) (England and Northern Ireland; Scotland and Wales).
9	Gulf Qualifications Framework (GQF)	<i>Members of the Gulf Cooperation Council:</i> Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)
10	Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa	Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda, possibly Eritrea

11	Marco de Cualificaciones Alianza del Pacifico (Qualifications framework of the Pacific Alliance) (MCAP)	<i>Four full members of the Pacific Alliance: Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru</i>
12	Marco de Cualificaciones para la Educación superior centroamericana/ Qualifications framework for higher education in Central America (MCESCA)	Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua y Panamá, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic and Belize
13	Pacific Register of Qualifications and Standards/ Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF)	<i>States of the Pacific Island Forum: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Tokelau, Australia and New Zealand.</i>
14	Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)	Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey Ukraine, United Kingdom, Vatican/ Holy See.
15	Southern African Development Community (SADC) Qualifications Framework (SADCQF)	Angola, Botswana, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe
16	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Regional Qualifications Framework	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
17	Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (TQF VUSSC)	Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Brunei Darussalam, Cyprus, Dominica, Eswatini, Fiji, Gambia, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Kiribati, Lesotho, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. <i>The Cayman Islands and Montserrat are also part of the network, even though they are not members of the Commonwealth.</i>

5.2 Annex 2: ACQF level descriptors glossary

Term	In the ACQF level descriptors the term:	Progression in complexity	Levels
abstract	means existing as a thought or idea but not having a physical existence		L6 to L9
adapt	means to alter methods of applying an existing procedure		L6
adaptability	means the extent of being able to adjust to new conditions		L3 to L4
advanced and highly advanced	Advanced means going beyond the usual, normal or routine and leading in a field	highly technical to advanced to highly advanced	L7 to L8
analyse	means to examine methodically, and in detail		L4 to L7
analytical	means relating to or using analysis or logical reasoning		L7 to L8
apply	means to use for a particular purpose	Use to apply	L4 to L5
area	means an aspect of knowledge		L2 to L10
autonomy	means independence in thoughts and/or actions		L8 to L10
autonomy and responsibility	means the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility		L1 to L10
basic	means common, and not specific, and refers to generic knowledge and skills		L1 to L2
close	means the most direct and most frequent supervision	close to limited to routine to general to full autonomy	L1
cognitive skills	means using logical, intuitive and creative thinking		L1 to L3
communication skills	means using abilities to send and receive information		L1-L10

complex and highly complex	means a number of aspects that need to be taken into consideration	highly technical to complex to highly complex	L6 to L9
context	means the conditions that form the setting for the development of autonomy and responsibility		L1 to L10
coordinating	means bringing together in planning and managing		L7-L8
creation	means the development of meaningful new ideas, methods and interpretations which go beyond current understanding and practice		L10
critical	means of significant importance		L10
critically evaluate	means to draw on advanced ideas to examine proposals and theories		L10
domain	means a category of learning		
emergent	means in the process of coming into being		L10
expert/ expertise	means substantial superiority and a great deal of knowledge and skills in a particular area	mastery to expertise	L10
factual	means restricted to facts rather than theories	factual to theoretical	L2-L4
familiar and unfamiliar	Familiar means frequent and well known. Unfamiliar means it is new to the individual but the individual can draw on experience with familiar problems to identify an appropriate response	familiar to familiar and unfamiliar to unfamiliar	L3 to L5
forefront	means leading and new in the field		L9-L10
formulate	means to create or prepare in a systematic way using a particular method		L6 to L10
full autonomy	means full independence in thoughts and/or actions, adaptability and self-direction		L5
full responsibility	means fully in control of planning, evaluating and improving		L3-L10

general	means a type of supervision that indicates the least direct and least frequent supervision	close to limited to routine to general to full autonomy	L4
group outcomes	means outcomes that can be achieved by working with others		L3-L9
guidance	means advice and direction	instruction to guidance	L2 to L4
highly advanced	see advanced		
highly complex	see complex		
highly specialised	see specialised		
highly structured and structured	means organised by someone else other than the individual doing the task	highly structured to structured	L1 to L2
idea	means a thought or suggestion to motivate a possible action		L2 to L10
initiative	means to show potential and/ or a personal willingness		L3 to L4; L7 to L8
innovation	means the introduction of new approaches, new elements or new methods in an existing or new activity		L7 to L10
insight	means comprehension, perception and judgement		L8 to L9
instruct/ instruction	means to tell, or the act of telling, someone what to do and, where appropriate, how to do it	instruction to guidance	L1
interface	means a point where systems meet and interact		L10
knowledge	means various kinds of knowledge such as facts, principles and theories in various areas		L1 to L10
level	means one of the series of levels of learning achievement according to which an NQF or RQF is organised. Levels are typically arranged in ascending order, from lowest to		L1 to L10

	highest, depending on the number of levels in the NQF or RQF		
limited	means supervision and responsibility that is restricted by specific rules and confined within limits	close/ minimal to limited to routine to general	L2
mastery	means superiority in knowledge and skills	mastery to expertise	L9
minimal	means the smallest amount	minimal to limited	L1
new	means not been done or experienced before		L4 to L10
operational	means a practical application or how to do something	operational to technical	L2 to L4
original	means created with a unique style, not copied from elsewhere		L9 to L10
planning	means preparation for an activity including defining or structuring activity. At higher levels it means more collaboration		L4 to L10
practical	means manual skills using methods, materials, tools and instruments		L1 to L3
predictable and unpredictable	means known in advanced and expected to happen. Unpredictable means uncertain and unexpected	predictable to predictable and unpredictable to unpredictable	L3 to L5
problem	means a complication in an activity that requires a choice, adjustment or adaptation.	simple to familiar to complex to new to emergent	L1 to L10
process	means a set of activities which lead to a specific outcome. A process may include a number of procedures		L6 to L10
range	means a number of aspects		L3 to L6
repetitive	means repeated or recurring		L1
research	means an advanced form of enquiry into a situation using a methodical approach to reach conclusions and make recommendations		L7 to L9

resources	means a supply of people, money and a range of materials that can be drawn upon by a person to function effectively		L6 to L10
responsibility	means a state of having control		L1 to L10
responsibility for self	means taking responsibility for thoughts, feelings, words or actions		L1 to L10
routine	means a type of supervision which is standard and regular	close to limited to routine to general	
select	means to choose as being the most suitable		L3
self-direction	means the extent of making decisions and organising own work rather than being told what to do		L4 to L10
simple	means uncomplicated and easy to understand. It can be used without experience and is found at the lowest level of complexity	simple to straightforward/ basic	L1
skills	means the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills.		L1 to L10
solution	means a way of solving a problem or dealing with a difficult situation		L1 to L10
some	means a small amount		L3 to L8
specialised and highly specialised	Specialised means requiring technical expertise	specialised to highly specialised to advanced	L6 to L10
straightforward	means clearly defined and uncomplicated but requires some experience	simple to straightforward to familiar	L2
sub-domain	means a sub-category of any domain of learning		
supervision	means the extent of the direction or control being applied to the individual who is being supervised		L1 to L3

synthesise	means to integrate or blend		L6
technical	means skills and abilities that are learned and proven, and which are commonly seen as necessary or valuable for effective action for a task or function in particular context (occupation, job, discipline etc.). Also referred to as occupational and/or task specific skills	technical to highly technical to complex/ advanced	L4 to L6
test	means to take measures to check the reliability of something or put through a trial		L9 to L10
theoretical	means concerned with or involving theory of a subject rather than its practical application		L3-L5
unfamiliar	see familiar		
unpredictable	see predictable		
use	means to take from a limited supply	use simple to use known to select and use to apply	L1 to L3
variable	means not consistent and liable to change		L6 to L7

5.3 Annex 3: ACQF level descriptors builder matrix version 5

	"Knowledge" includes various kinds of knowledge such as facts, principles and theories in various areas		"Skills" refer to the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills.				"Autonomy and responsibility" refers to the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility				
level	knowledge		skills				context	autonomy	responsibility		
	type of knowledge	scope	type of skills	respond to information	address problems	types of problems	contexts	autonomy	self	group outcomes	resources
Level 1: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	simple knowledge, literacy and numeracy		simple communication, cognitive and practical skills	follow simple instructions	use simple repetitive solutions	simple problems	highly structured, repetitive contexts	close supervision and guidance	minimal responsibility		
Level 2: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	basic knowledge incorporating comprehension and recall of factual and operational knowledge	in some areas	basic communication, cognitive and practical skills	use concrete information and ideas	use known solutions	straight forward problems	structured contexts	limited supervision and guidance	limited responsibility		
Level 3: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	factual and operational knowledge incorporating some theoretical aspects	in some areas	a range of communication, cognitive, practical and technical skills	interpret and communicate ideas and detailed information	select and use known solutions	familiar problems	predictable contexts	routine supervision and guidance and initiative for adaptability	initiative for responsibility	some responsibility	
Level 4: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mainly factual, operational or technical knowledge incorporating theoretical aspects	in one or more areas	well-developed technical skills	analyse information and ideas, make informed judgements and communicate outcomes	apply varied solutions	varied (familiar and unfamiliar) problems	varied (predictable and unpredictable) contexts	adaptability and initiative for self-direction under general guidance	full responsibility	some planning and responsibility	initiative for responsibility for others

Level 5: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mainly technical or theoretical knowledge with substantial depth	in a discipline/ area	a range of well-developed technical skills with some specialisation	analyse information and new ideas and construct and communicate coherent arguments	apply a range of solutions often in combination	unfamiliar problems	unpredictable contexts	full autonomy	full responsibility	some responsibility for others
Level 6: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	highly technical or theoretical knowledge, with specialisation	in a discipline/ area	highly technical and specialised skills	collate, analyse, synthesise and communicate a range of information and new ideas	formulate or adapt different solutions	complex and sometimes abstract problems	highly variable contexts	well-developed autonomy	well-developed responsibility	responsibility for resources and processes
Level 7: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	advanced analytical, and/ or specialised knowledge	of a discipline/ area	advanced skills	demonstrate advanced analysis and initiative for new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation	formulate advanced solutions	complex and abstract problems	complex and variable contexts	advanced	advanced	
Level 8: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	highly advanced, complex knowledge	of a discipline/ area	highly advanced, complex skills	demonstrate highly advanced analysis and communicate new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation	formulate highly advanced solutions	highly complex and abstract problems	highly complex contexts with some specialisation	highly advanced	highly advanced	
Level 9: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mastery of a complex body of knowledge	at the forefront of a discipline/ area	mastery	demonstrate originality and new insights in research and/ or innovation	formulate and test theories	mastery of highly complex, abstract problems	highly specialised contexts	mastery	mastery	

Level 10: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	substantial and original knowledge contribution	that extends the forefront of a discipline/ area and/ or at the interface between disciplines/ areas	expert skills and techniques	demonstrate innovation, interpretation and creation of emergent and new ideas	critically evaluate, formulate and test theories	emergent, new and critical problems	emergent, new contexts	expertise	expertise in management of new ideas
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