Qualification and credit levels: a technical document

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Introduction

There is currently an impetus to develop and revisit national and transnational qualification frameworks in many countries, at least part driven by regional organisations such as the European Union and the Southern Africa Development Community. This has brought with it a need for a wider awareness of the concept of 'level' as distinct from length or sequence of qualifications, as well as better understandings of how levels can be described in ways that are easily understood without restricting the range of achievements that can be acknowledged. The way that many current level frameworks are presented suggests that there is still work to be done to move away from assumptions based on stages of progression or years of study, even in systems that are ostensibly based on outcome-type attributes. In some cases there is also room for levels to be described more consistently and in a way that can be applied to a wider range of qualifications and achievements.

This paper explores some of the ideas behind qualification levels and frameworks and identifies some issues and approaches geared to improving the quality and relevance of the way that levels are specified.

From spines to frameworks

The idea of qualifications occupying a series of levels is not particularly new, and it is inherent in the idea that one qualification is needed for entry to another. The most common example, with fairly wide international currency, is the progression through junior school leaving certificate, senior leaving certificate, first or bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate. This qualification 'spine' can then be used to attach other types of qualification: for instance a basic skills certificate below the lower end, standard and advanced vocational certificates parallel to the two school qualifications, and an intermediate higher education qualification or advanced technical certificate that sits between these and the bachelor's degree. This common-sense approach forms the tacit basis for many national frameworks and it is generally adequate in simple contexts where qualifications are perceived as a series of steps. It also fits well with public perceptions of where qualifications sit relative to one another, and therefore provides an easy way of explaining qualification levels even when more sophisticated ways of describing them have emerged.

This 'spinal' approach to level does however suffer from a number of problems and distortions that become apparent in complex systems of qualifications such as those that have evolved in parts of Europe and much of the English-speaking world. Many qualifications will be difficult to find parallels for, and they may become positioned by reference to arbitrary characteristics such as their length and the kind of institution that teaches or awards them. There is ample scope to confuse progression with

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level, so that for instance anything designed to be taken by graduates can become labelled 'postgraduate' even if it is concerned with basic foreign language or secretarial skills. Debates about the merit of different kinds of qualification can cloud perceptions of their level, so that vocationally-oriented certificates can be viewed as at a lower level than comparable academic ones. Two further disadvantages of linear systems are that they can restrict progression by making assumptions about the need to complete one level before proceeding to the next, and discourage approaches that recognise previous learning from experience or from other non-accredited sources.

For these reasons there has been a widespread move away from a purely spinal approach to one based on frameworks that make explicit what is required for a qualification to be positioned at a particular level. This transition has tended to occur relatively slowly in the first instance, with frameworks emerging for specific purposes before genuinely national systems were introduced. In the UK for instance separate frameworks emerged for competence-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), credit accumulation and transfer in higher education, certification and credit in the Open College Network, and recognising work-based learning towards academic qualifications (the Ufi *Learning through Work* programme); apart from Scotland where a unified framework was developed fairly rapidly these have still not (as at the end of 2009) come together into a single system, although there is now a broad national consensus on the framework levels. Interestingly the only UK framework not to have had a spinal origin, the five-level NVQ framework, was ultimately rejected because it was difficult to cross-reference to higher education qualifications or accommodate basic skills.

Frameworks of qualifications or level frameworks?

Currently there are two main types of framework in use. One is principally a hierarchy of key qualifications arranged by level, while the other is a set of levels described independently of any qualifications or components. The qualification-based approach is essentially a direct descendant of the spinal model, although it is supplemented by clear descriptions of what is required for each qualification type; the level framework is less explicitly related to a qualification spine, although most systems that use a purely levels-based approach have their origins in a spinal structure.

Qualification-based systems are exemplified by the Australian Qualifications Framework and the UK Framework of Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)[1]. These frameworks describe the generic characteristics of the (major) qualifications that make up the national system, rather than describing the levels themselves. The UK framework is based on key qualifications at each of five levels: Certificate of Higher Education, Diploma of Higher Education (or foundation degree), bachelor's (honours) degree, master's degree and doctorate. At some levels there are also widely-used qualifications that are subsets of the 'full' award described for the level (e.g. Graduate Diploma at honours degree level and Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma at master's level). The Australian framework on the other hand is purely a framework of (currently) 17 national qualification types within what can be inferred as eleven levels; there is no intention of recognising other qualifications by way of comparison, and at some levels there are two or more types of qualification with slightly different specifications.

[1] Frameworks are referenced at the end of the article.

Level-based systems are used more widely and include the remaining UK frameworks as well as those used in South Africa, New Zealand, Ireland, Mexico and Victoria (Australia). A level-based system simply describes each level, rather than describing characteristics of qualifications or components positioned at the level. In principle it can be used to position whole qualifications, components such as units and modules, and individual learning (for instance via a learning contract or for recognition of experiential learning); in practice most frameworks are used directly for only one or two of these purposes, and are often described accordingly (e.g. qualifications framework, credit framework, qualifications and credit framework). Recently-introduced transnational frameworks such as those in Europe, southern Africa and the Caribbean are all level-based, and over time it is probable that level-based approaches will replace those centred on qualifications. The framework for the European Higher Education Area is intermediate in type as the four 'Bologna cycles' are described both in terms of level (the 'Dublin descriptors') and as processes based on educational programmes.

Specifying levels

Defining the levels within a framework requires some form of authoritative specification of what each level represents: what is commonly known as a set of level 'descriptors' (the term is used here to describe the overall statement or group of statements that define each level). If the framework is not to revert to being a qualifications spine, the descriptors need to avoid referring to linear progression, stage of development or existing qualification types; instead they need to indicate the attributes represented by each level. This is commonly (but not entirely accurately) referred to as a learning outcomes approach, as it is based directly or indirectly on the things that individuals need to be able to demonstrate in order to achieve a qualification, component or credit at the relevant level.

Two formats are commonly used for level descriptors. The first is a prose statement, often a short paragraph, that describes the overall characteristics of the level. The advantage of this format is that if written well it provides a short and definitive statement of what the level involves that should make sense to anyone involved in education and training, and potentially to the wider public. The disadvantage when used alone is that it may not be sufficiently detailed to determine where qualifications should be positioned, less still units or the outcomes of individuals' learning. The only UK frameworks where these are the only form of descriptor are the now largely redundant NVQ and Open College Network frameworks. Examples of this kind of descriptor are given below:

> At Level 3, you will be making decisions about appropriate approaches, coping with situations which present a range of problems and choices, and reviewing your work. You will need to be able to use your understanding of principles which apply to your work, as well as drawing on your own ideas and experience to solve problems.
> (Ufi Learning through Work [UK], 2001)

> Successful completion of a unit at this level (3) would mean that a learner would be able to carry out tasks and activities that involve a combination of theoretical and/or technical and factual knowledge and skills. Judgement is required in varying guidelines or procedures to deal effectively with any unusual or unexpected aspects that may arise. Some skills in organising self and/or others are also needed.
> (Victorian Credit Matrix [Australia], 2005).

The second descriptor format consists of a series of short statements or 'bullet-points' describing specific attributes relevant to the level (see tables 1 and 3 for examples). Depending on the level of detail, these statements – often referred to as level indicators, as they are indicative of the level rather than defining or describing it – may not be particularly meaningful on their own, but taken together they provide a series of reference-points that can either be used to position existing qualifications, components or learning outcomes to a best-fit level, or as a guide for creating qualifications and components that are designed to be positioned at specific levels. The style of indicator depends on the purpose of the framework, so that as a rule frameworks that are designed to position components and individual outcomes for credit purposes tend to have more (and more detailed) indicators than those designed for whole qualifications. To compensate for the level of detail, to provide a view of the metaphorical 'wood' as well as the 'trees,' an overall descriptor for each level is often used as well. Meta-frameworks such as the EQF tend to have a few broad indicators as they are designed as reference-points for levels in other frameworks rather than for positioning qualifications directly.

Table 1. A level descriptor using indicators arranged in three domains or main themes
(from the England, Wales and Northern Ireland Qualifications and Credit Framework, 2007 draft)

Level	Knowledge and understanding	Application and action	Autonomy and accountability
Level 3	◆ Use factual, procedural and theoretical understanding to complete tasks and address problems that while well-defined may be complex and non-routine ◆ Interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas ◆ Be aware of the nature of the area of study or work ◆ Have awareness of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work	◆ Address problems that while well-defined may be complex and non-routine ◆ Identify, select and use appropriate skills, methods and procedures ◆ Use appropriate investigation to inform actions ◆ Review how effective methods and actions have been	◆ Take responsibility for initiating and completing tasks and procedures, including where relevant responsibility for supervising or guiding others ◆ Exercise autonomy and judgement within limited parameters

The way that level indicators are applied varies depending on purpose and on the way the framework has been designed. In 'open' systems, where a large range of widely varying qualifications or components are mapped against level descriptors, it is unlikely that any one qualification or component will reflect all the indicators at any one level. However a best-fit level can usually be identified where the qualification matches the largest number of indicators: typically, qualifications will demonstrate a varied profile where they match some indicators at one level, others at a different level, while some are not relevant. In more 'closed' systems qualifications or components can be designed to show a better match with the indicators. In this case various rules are used to decide how the indicators are applied to full qualifications, to components, or to both. For example, a full qualification may need to reflect all the indicators at the relevant level, or perhaps only those in two out of three domains, while a component might simply show a best fit; or components may need to reflect a minimum number of indicators, or a majority of the indicators in one domain. For the 'closed' approach it is more critical to ensure that level indicators are written carefully to reflect what it is desired to include in all qualifications in the system.

In some credit systems level indicators are also used directly as a benchmark for individual learning and achievement. This often includes use to recognise previously unaccredited learning, where the indicators are used as criteria to judge the level of achievement. It also features in some systems

where the qualification 'content' is negotiated individually through a learning agreement, such as in the UK's *Learning through Work* system and other work-based learning programmes normally at university level. In this context the indicators effectively act as level-based assessment criteria that complement the specific learning objectives agreed in the contract; this was one of the purposes behind creating the Ufi *Learning through Work* level definitions.

Themes and constructs

Where there are more than five or six indicators per level, they are often grouped into several main themes such as knowledge, skills and autonomy (see table 2). These themes or domains are not essential in indicator-based specifications, but they do serve several useful functions including maintaining a flow of themes between the different levels, aiding presentation and clarity, and providing a simple way of showing differences in emphasis between different qualifications. The coverage of each theme is far from consistent between frameworks, as illustrated in table 2. Nevertheless several themes are almost universal, although the way they are described can differ substantially between frameworks:

- Knowledge and / or understanding. This may be expressed primarily as knowledge 'of' (facts, procedures, theories etc) or in terms of the adequacy of knowledge for different levels of complexity.

- Skills. These may include cognitive as well as practical skills. Sometimes process knowledge or 'know-how' is included under cognitive skills.

- Application or competence. This refers to the application of skills or knowledge to do something rather than their demonstration in isolation.

- Complexity and scope. This refers to the complexity and range of situations or problems that the learner should be able to engage with effectively.

- Autonomy and / or responsibility. This generally follows a spectrum from working under close supervision to responsibility for major decisions, sometimes with sub-themes referring specifically to learning and to managing people and processes.

Table 2. Coverage of domains (major themes) in selected frameworks

Framework	Major themes				
EQF	knowledge	skills		competence	
UK* (QCF) * not Scotland	knowledge and understanding		application and action		autonomy and accountability
N Ireland	intellectual skills and attributes		processes		accountability
Victoria	knowledge and skills			application	degree of independence
NZ	learning demand		process		responsibility
UK* (Ufi) * not Scotland	thinking and understanding	innovation and originality	investigation and evaluation	scope	complexity and responsibility

Scotland	knowledge and understanding	generic cognitive skills	practice: applied know-ledge and understanding	communication, ICT and numeracy skills	--	autonomy, accountability and working with others

The organisation of indicators into themes introduces the notion of constructs. A construct in relation to qualification levels is an attribute with a particular meaning that can be described on a spectrum that relates to the level framework. Simple examples are complexity (simple … [very] complex), dependence (dependent … independent), and skill (unskilled … [highly] skilled). These constructs do express concepts that are central to qualification levels, but they need to be expanded and contextualised to be genuinely useful. Situations, for instance, may range from simple, straightforward and safe to highly complex with many interacting factors and a high level of criticality, suggesting that several basic constructs may be needed within one indicator to describe progression in a way that is useful. Indicators addressing the same theme may need to use different combinations of constructs at different levels, or they may need to allow for more than one kind of progression; an example of the latter is knowledge, which can become deeper and more specialised with level, or broader and more cognisant of general principles.

Taking individual constructs and applying them across a range of levels is therefore extremely difficult, and it is likely to be more useful to think in terms of broad and more detailed themes. To provide an example the level indicators used in the Republic of Ireland are expressed as a matrix, with eight themes each of which is described at each of ten framework levels; while this is workable and it has the advantage of making the boundaries between levels fairly clear, it can look quite clumsy as it appears to give equal weight to all the themes at every level. The other level descriptors developed in a comparable way were those of the Ufi *Learning through Work* framework. With this framework five key themes were identified (as in table 2), represented by two or more indicators (sub-themes) at each level. Within each theme the indicators can change, merge or split with progression through the levels (see table 3). The result is a fairly coherent overall structure with reasonably clear distinctions between level.

Level boundaries and differentiators

In constructing levels it can aid clarity to consider the differences between each pair of levels: what is required at the higher level that is not present at the level below? In frameworks where a consistent set of themes have been mapped out across the levels, such as the Irish framework, *Learning through Work* and to an extent the European framework, it is relatively easy to identify changes from one level to the next. Where thematic progression is less clear, as is often the case where level indicators have been more influenced by pre-exising frameworks or the characteristics of constituent qualifications, this is often more difficult to do. Using *Learning through Work* as an example,

- Most, but not all, indicators change between levels. In table 3, there are examples where the indicators change significantly, where the difference between them is relatively subtle (e.g. ‘understanding’ rather than ‘recognising’ the implications of different issues and courses of action), and where the same indicator appears at two levels.

- Major themes generally change between levels. However where there are several main themes not all need contribute significantly to the difference between every pair of levels: in the example, 'scope' is important as a differentiator at the lower levels but less so at the upper ones, and between levels 7 and 8 the only difference is that dilemmas and value-conflicts need to be managed "in a way which takes forward wider practice." Clearer distinctions are present between levels 7 and 8, and 6 and 7, in some of the other major themes.

T*able 3. Following a theme through a series of levels* *('scope,' Ufi* Learning through Work*, 2001)*

E	• Working within well- defined rules or guidelines • Accepting boundaries of work as given
1	• Working within rules or guidelines which require a minimal level of interpretation • Accepting boundaries of work as given, querying if unsure
2	• Interpreting and applying rules and guidelines to the area of work • Identifying different approaches within the overall guidance or boundaries of work
3	• Recognising principles and issues applying to the area of work • Identifying different outcomes and approaches within the overall boundaries of the work area
4	• Recognising the implications of different issues and courses of action • Identifying and evaluating the practical effects and impact of operating parameters
5	• Understanding the implications of different issues and courses of action • Identifying dilemmas and value-conflicts • Identifying and evaluating the effects and impact of operating parameters and principles
6	• Understanding the implications of different issues and courses of action • Understanding and managing dilemmas and value-conflicts • Identifying interrelationships between wider systems in which the area of practice is located
7	• Understanding alternative implications of different issues and courses of action • Understanding and managing dilemmas and value-conflicts • Understanding and acting on interrelationships between wider systems in which the area of practice is located
8	• Understanding alternative implications of different issues and courses of action • Understanding and managing dilemmas and value-conflicts in a way which takes forward wider practice • Understanding and acting on interrelationships between wider systems in which the area of practice is located

Levels and grades (or levels of competence)

Grades, or levels of competence or performance, are conceptually different from qualification and credit levels in that they represent the degree of achievement in relation to an assessment specification. Grades or performance levels can be represented in various ways including lettered grades, percentages, designations such as fail, pass, merit and distinction, and competence scales such as the Dreyfus novice-to-expert model.

In practice levels and grades are not quite so distinct. Inadequate performance in relation to one level might be sufficient to achieve a qualification or credit at the level below, or it may not; similarly excellent performance could take the individual into the next level, or it may be insufficient to do so. The relationship depends on two things - the breadth of performance considered by the grading scale, and the qualitative relationship between what's expected at different levels. If grading distinguishes relatively small steps in performance, it's less likely that there will be overlap between

‘excellent’ at level A and ‘poor’ at level B above it - but in practice grade bands would have to be set almost impossibly finely for this to work where there is little qualitative difference in what’s being asked at the two levels. Where there’s a major qualitative difference in what’s represented by adjacent levels, even the highest degree of excellence at level A won’t push the individual into the bottom band of level B. This can be represented as follows:

Table 4. Levels and grades

		Range covered by the grade bands	
		Narrow	Broad
Qualitative difference in what is represented by adjacent levels	Discrete	**Distinct** Levels are discrete: excellent performance at level A is easily distinguished from adequate performance at level B (the next level up)	**Fairly distinct** Excellent performance at level A may suggest overlap into level B but the requirements at level B should still be sufficiently distinct
	Continuous	**Partly blurred** Excellent performance at level A overlaps with adequate performance at level B	**Blurred** Excellent performance at level A may overlap not only with level B but with adequate performance at level C or D

Traditionally it has been usual for qualifications and therefore levels to be regarded as distinct from grades, even if the achievements represented by high-grade achievement at one level actually overlap into the acceptable band for the next. Exceptions in the UK system have been awarding an O-level (the old junior leaving certificate) for mediocre performance in an A-level (the senior certificate), or a master’s degree for a thesis that falls short of what is needed for a doctorate. The latter practice still continues but with clearer criteria for accepting the thesis as meeting the requirements of a master’s degree. Currently the main anomaly occurs in the current junior leaving certificate (GCSE), where the lower grades are deemed to be at (UK) level 1 and grades A-C (the old pass grades for O-level) at level 2.

More recently the emergence of qualifications that allow individual programmes to be negotiated has started to blur distinctions between qualification level and level of achievement, particularly in higher education. Where learning outcomes are individually determined it is easily conceivable that an excellent piece of work will qualify for a higher level qualification or credit than a more average one covering the same sort of ground. The development of generic level-based assessment criteria in university credit systems has reinforced this perspective (e.g. the same project could be written up to meet criteria at one of several levels). However, at present the normal rule is that an individual will register for a qualification or credit at a given level (possibly after having his or her proposed learning outcomes considered), then achieve an award at that level and not the one above or below. If the work being produced looks as if it will fall short or alternatively meet the requirements of a higher level, some universities allow the target qualification to be renegotiated (though not normally at the point of assessment). It is worth noting that there has been a strong move away from grading in negotiated qualifications, partly in recognition of the difficulty of distinguishing both level *and* grade in a system where there is no preset curriculum.

Issues of value

The constructs and themes used in level frameworks reflect particular kinds of values, both about the attributes that are considered relevant to the idea of qualification level overall, and what is valued in terms of recognising one kind of achievement as being at a higher level than another. Even if levels

are described in relatively abstract terms it is not really possible to escape the fact that they are constructed according to a particular perspective or set of perspectives. The best that can be done is probably to ensure that they reflect a relatively broad set of values that are widely accepted across the society they come from. If they don't do this, they will be shown up as privileging some kinds of activities over others in a way that is seen as unjust and detrimental. There is often a fairly long cultural history attached to the issues of value that appear in level frameworks; for instance in the twentieth century western European societies have tended to value propositional knowledge over more tacit, 'softer' and craft- or art-based forms of knowing, effectively devaluing work and learning that doesn't draw on an explicit body of knowledge.

This issue of knowledge appears quite widely in frameworks, particularly where there is a strong influence from general or higher education although it can also appear at the higher levels of specifically vocational frameworks such as the old UK NVQ framework. The problem occurs most strongly where *type* of knowledge is used as a proxy for *level* of knowledge, for instance in statements such as 'a broad base of general knowledge,' 'mastery of a specialised knowledge-base' and so forth. Alternative methods of describing knowledge, knowing and understanding are available that don't suffer from these problems: for instance a construct could be used that runs from knowledge of simple facts and procedures through concepts and ideas to understanding that is at the forefront of, and finally extends, current knowledge and thinking. A further useful approach is to conceptualise knowledge as having adequacy for different levels of complexity, so at the most basic level it is concerned with remembering instructions for simple tasks and at the most complex with extending the boundaries of understanding and practice.

Another common proxy in some level systems is to refer to management activity as part of the autonomy or responsibility theme, for instance by bringing in supervision and management of others at the middle levels and developing this to strategic management at the equivalent of master's level. The difficulty with this is that it can make the relevant level indicators difficult to apply to non-management contexts, and it can also imply that management activity automatically warrants a particular minimum level. Management in itself is both too vague and too limiting to be useful in delineating levels, and attempts to make it more relevant tend to move into descriptions of specific occupational functions (e.g. "take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups" at level 6 of the EQF). A more considered approach might draw out what it is about management activity that relates to level, and then describing it in generally applicable terms (such as being able to make effective judgements and decisions in complex contexts).

A related issue that appears in some level descriptions is the confusion of context with the learner's or candidate's ability to operate effectively within the context. Although this can be an effective form of shorthand it can suffer from the problem that qualifications, components or individual achievements can be deemed to be at a particular level simply because the context is present. Complexity, for instance, is a central construct in level systems but it is the learner's ability to engage effectively with complex contexts that matters rather than the fact that complexity is present in itself.

An analogous problem to the management issue can be encountered in the use of the term 'research.' In some systems the idea of 'research' appears somewhere in the mid to upper levels, and 'original research' at the top level. Without further qualification this appears to make assumptions both about the nature of research (a basic level of research could be carried out at any level), and

imply that research is necessary a feature of the higher levels. Clarification of what is meant by research – as has been done in the Ufi theme of 'investigation and evaluation' – is needed for the term to be a useful construct for informing level.

Finally, care needs to be taken about assuming that terms have particular level-related connotations. In various contexts terms such as semi-skilled, skilled, craft, technical, managerial and professional can carry ideas of level, but these are at best popular shorthand and at worst prejudicial and discriminatory. As an example 'craft' is frequently used with a similar connotation to 'skilled manual' to imply no more than a middling level, perhaps parallel with the senior school leaving certificate; but some crafts require a much higher level of skill and understanding that would put them in the upper reaches of professional or higher education. These types of terms can be useful as shorthand in occupational areas where they have a specific meaning, but they are far from robust enough for general use.

Some wider issues

There is not space for a full critique of qualification levels and frameworks in this paper, but the following are mentioned as areas where issues can arise.

In many frameworks there is still some confusion between the notion of level and the notion of progression. The worst examples contain many fine distinctions between qualifications on the basis that one is taken after another, takes longer to complete, or has elements that are slightly more advanced. There may be little recognition in these frameworks of progression within a level, or that it can be normal in some areas to take two qualifications at the same level (e.g. taking a technical and a supervisory qualification to be regarded as fully qualified). Sometimes frameworks become distorted either by a desire to position every key national qualification at a different level, or by refusal to recognise that levels in one part of the system (such as upper secondary education) can overlap with those in another (such as higher education).

Level frameworks can also unintentionally suppress the development of higher-level qualifications in certain areas by assuming that particular bands apply to particular kinds of activity. This is not normally a fault of the framework *per se*, but of the wider qualification system and associated policy framework. As an example many manual or craft occupations in the UK have a cut-off point at level 3 (EQF level 4), because that is the threshold level for initial training (which incidentally is reinforced by current rules for apprenticeship funding). Another example is what is effectively a firm boundary at level 3 for senior secondary education, leading to the development of more discerning criteria (such as the A* grade at A-level) and challenging programmes (such as the Advanced Extension Award) without any recognition that these might be overlapping into the next level and therefore the territory of higher education.

Finally, while qualification and credit frameworks are generally beneficial in encouraging progression, credit transfer and cross-border recognition of qualifications, they can also give an impression of some qualifications being of less value because of their level, as well as promoting certificate-chasing by individuals and credential inflation by employers and bodies representing occupations and professions. On balance the positive attributes appear to outweigh the negatives, but the latter cannot be ignored.

Some conclusions

Frameworks of levels for recognising educational and related achievements appear to be a desirable and to some extent inevitable feature of modern education and training systems, particularly when allied to the aim of increasing workforce mobility. They do however need to be neutral as to the form, location and field of achievement, avoid embodying values and proxies that reinforce traditional (or more contemporary) prejudices, and allow the design of qualifications and associated practices to evolve within them.

Currently there is a move in some parts of the world towards transnational compatibility, either through common frameworks as in southern Africa or cross-referencing frameworks such as the EQF in Europe. Over time it is likely that this trend will continue in four ways: first through increasing harmonisation within regions (for instance by European countries adapting their national frameworks to align more closely with the EQF), secondly through regional frameworks influencing national frameworks in countries outside the region (e.g. interest in Australia in referencing to the EQF), thirdly through developments in individual countries that effectively bypass the national system and refer directly to international benchmarks, and finally through different regional frameworks moving closer together.

Within frameworks, it is possible to describe levels pragmatically both by reference to attributes and in relation to a spine of key qualifications. The attributes approach is more progressive in the sense that it does not rely on qualification archetypes, it largely avoids inferences about length, mode or place of study, it allows flexibility and innovation, and it isn't limited to a single national system. Spine-based descriptions are likely to have more resonance with the general public and may be used to contextualise levels to local practice, a particular area of education or an occupational sector. While all ways of describing level are imperfect and value-based, more attention is needed to ensure that level descriptors and indicators do not embody unwarranted prejudices and distortions.

Author

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Initials and acronyms

CCEA	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland)
CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework Wales
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
FHEQ	Framework of Higher Education Qualifications (UK)
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
NICATS	Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme
NQF	National qualifications framework
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification

SCQF Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
QAA Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK)
QCA Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (England)
Ufi Ufi Ltd, the 'University for Industry' (Learndirect)

List of frameworks

The following are the key publications in which frameworks examined in writing the article or referred to in the text are defined. Internet references where given are the most recent locations (accessed March 2009) of the documents or of web-based extracts.

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