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**THEMATIC CDP BRIEFS >> 10**

**ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS –  
THE STORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY**



THE AFRICA-EU PARTNERSHIP  
LE PARTENARIAT AFRIQUE-UE



## African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)

Capacity development programme 2021-2022

### Thematic Brief 10

## ACQF Level descriptors – the story of the development journey

*This Thematic Brief summarises the reflections on the development of ACQF level descriptors. This Thematic brief was published in ACQF Newsletter (Issue of 15/03/2022).*

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## Abstract

The African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is a ten-level Regional Qualifications Meta-Framework and serves as a reference and translation tool that may be used to interpret qualification levels on the continent. The learning outcomes based ACQF level descriptors describe learning at a specific ACQF level, regardless of how or where this learning was obtained. The descriptors serve as a transparent basis for referencing levels of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) or systems to the ACQF. They further provide an orientation for countries/regions to develop qualifications frameworks or systems and orientate towards common minimum benchmarks for learning outcomes on the continent. The ACQF descriptors are meta-descriptors that serve a continental agenda and will not capture the same complexities as national level descriptors.

ACQF meta-descriptors are expressed as learning outcomes structured on ten cumulative levels defined by three domains of learning: knowledge, skills, and autonomy and responsibility. The development of the meta-descriptors is grounded in research and consultation, building on ACQF reports and other Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQFs). The methodological approach to shaping the meta-descriptors involved the creation of a builder matrix, as a living working tool showing its horizontal and vertical evolution coupled with complementary content including a detailed glossary. Consultations and technical meetings took place between September and December 2021 to present, design, discuss and refine the descriptors and a first draft was presented to the ACQF Advisory Group (AG) in January 2022.

## 1. Introduction and background

The African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is intended as a common translation instrument that may be used to understand and interpret the various qualification levels on the African continent. At the very core of the ACQF is its level descriptors that provide transparent descriptions of the complexities of learning at a specific level of the ACQF, irrespective of how or where this learning was obtained.

### 1.1 Key concepts

Qualifications Frameworks (QFs) are systems of classification and can exist at national level as National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and regional level as Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQFs). NQFs can be comprehensive (inclusive of all sectors: general education, vocational education and higher education) or sectoral (inclusive of a specific sector only). In the ACQF community of 55 members, 27 QF developments have been identified, 60% of which are ten-level QFs:

- **21 Comprehensive NQFs:** Angola, Botswana, Cape Verde, Egypt, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, The Gambia, Tunisia, Zambia, Zimbabwe
- **Four Sectoral NQFs:** Nigeria (technical and vocational education and training [TVET]), Uganda (TVET), Senegal (TVET), Tanzania (higher education)
- **Two RQFs:** The East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education and the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework.

#### 1.1.1 National Qualifications Framework

An NQF is a policy and instrument for developing and classifying qualifications according to a continuum of agreed levels of learning achievement defined by learning outcomes - statements of what a learner must know, understand and be able to do no matter how the learning was obtained: in a classroom, on the job, or less formally (ACQF, 2021d). NQFs aim to improve transparency and quality of learning and co-ordinate and integrate the various national qualifications subsystems. It is a way of structuring existing and new qualifications and indicates the comparability of different qualifications and progression from one level to another, and in comprehensive NQFs, progression across vocational and academic fields.

## 1.1.2 Regional Qualifications Framework

An RQF is defined (*ibid*) as a broad structure of levels of learning outcomes agreed by countries in a defined geographical location, that can enable one national framework of qualifications to relate to another and, subsequently, for qualifications to be compared between countries. An RQF may contain a number of NQFs. The ACQF is part of a global community of 17 RQF initiatives (European Training Foundation, 2021a) across the world. As the ACQF develops and progresses, it can be compared and referenced to other RQFs. This will enhance the comparability of the ACQF with other parts of the world, and eventually lead to the transparency of qualifications globally.

## 1.1.3 Level descriptors

Level descriptors are common to both NQFs and RQFs and are defined (*ibid*) as statements, describing learning achievement at a particular level of a Qualifications Framework, that provide a broad indication of the types of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are appropriate to a qualification or learning at that level.

## 1.2 Differentiating between regional and national level descriptors

### 1.2.1 Purpose of ACQF descriptors

Learning outcomes based descriptors are key features of the ACQF and are embedded in ACQF policy, including its vision, aspirations, purpose, scope, quality assurance criteria and governance arrangements (ACQF, 2021a, 2021b). The ACQF descriptors are formulated as regional, generic, broad statements of the complexity of learning outcomes that can accommodate, and value all forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal), and can be applied across all African Union (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. The meta-descriptors will enhance transparency and comparability of qualifications of different national systems and support the ACQF as translation device across different qualifications systems and frameworks.

ACQF meta-descriptors thus serve the following complementary purposes:

- a basis for referencing levels of NQFs or systems to the ACQF
- orientation for countries/regions in developing qualifications frameworks or systems
- orientation towards common minimum benchmarks for outcomes of learning on the continent.

As representative of a regional meta-framework and translation device, the ACQF descriptors are brief, deliberately use a general language, and may reflect some of the learning domains of the participating member states. ACQF descriptors will not capture the same complexities that are evident in national level descriptors.

### 1.2.2 Purpose of national level descriptors

Although similar in design and logic, national level descriptors must be fit for purpose and capture the complexities of the national system. The national level descriptor statements describe the complexity of learning in qualifications/qualification types and are often linked to features of existing qualifications. As a benchmark for levels of learning achievement recognised at national level, they indicate the allocation of a national qualification to an NQF level. 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.

The ACQF as a policy instrument supports transparency, change and innovation taking into account the national and regional diversity. This article provides an overview of the evolutionary processes followed in engineering the ACQF meta-descriptors. It is hoped that this will provide clarity on the ACQF descriptors and encourage countries to reference (link) national qualification levels to the ACQF.

## 2. Laying the foundation for ACQF descriptor development

The development of the ACQF descriptors is grounded in research and consultation and builds on ACQF reports and other regional qualifications frameworks (RQFs). A literature survey took into account key analyses of African level descriptors presented in various ACQF reports (ACQF, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c); as well as an orientation paper (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2021b) that focused on key learnings from other NQFs and RQFs. Key findings from the literature and a specific survey conducted with ACQF stakeholders and other experts provided useful inputs for options for domains of learning and level structure, and a set of key principles for engineering the ACQF meta-descriptors. These were presented at an ACQF peer learning webinar (PLW) in September 2021.

### 2.1 Guiding principles

A set of principles was established and considered in the regional design and coherence. The principles included: components of transparency, a learning outcomes and future orientation, generic scope, developmental and cumulative aspects, and conceptual and technical clarity.

### 2.2 Ten level structure

The ACQF is a ten-level structure that must bring together a community of 55 members and must enable countries to reference their qualifications levels. In the ACQF environment there is a diversity of frameworks ranging from 5 to 10 levels with 10-level frameworks being most predominant (60%). A 10-level structure accommodates the majority of QFs in Africa.

### 2.3 Learning outcomes based on three domains of learning

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, namely one or more of the following: application, competence, autonomy, responsibility:

- Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRf) includes knowledge and skills, and application and responsibility
- European Qualifications Framework (EQF) includes knowledge, skills, and responsibility and autonomy
- Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) includes knowledge and skills, and application and autonomy
- Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) includes knowledge, skills, and autonomy and responsibility
- Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) includes knowledge and understanding, skills and wider personal and professional competences.

Applying the principle of simplicity, the ACQF has only three domains of learning namely knowledge, skills, and autonomy and responsibility. The domain outcomes are based on the findings of a prioritised list extracted from a survey of African level descriptors (ACQF, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) and the universal domain descriptions.

## 3. The builder matrix approach

Although the development process builds on existing literature, the literature did not specifically provide a methodological approach on where to start and how to approach the writing, although analyses identified that certain principles steer the shaping.

The ACQF meta-descriptor development started with an initial rough first version building on ACQF reports and the build of complexities in other RQFs such as the AQRf, EQF, PQF, SADCQF and TQF. This initial version placed Level 10 at the top of the framework, reflected the descriptions of knowledge, skills, autonomy and responsibility and applied some of the ACQF descriptor principles. After presentation of the initial version to the Steering Group of ACQF experts, a key decision was taken to:

- Use a builder matrix approach as a methodology to craft the ACQF level descriptors
- Present the development in a living, working matrix using an Excel spreadsheet

- Keep track of the evolution of the descriptors as well as any complementary context including a detailed glossary.

In this builder matrix approach, consultation and discussion is key:

- Consultation takes place through technical meetings with the steering group
- The steering group suggests changes, the writer makes the changes and then circulates the updated evolving matrix and glossary before the next meeting so that the steering group can study the document and make informed inputs at the next meeting.

Technical meetings and discussions took place between October and December 2021 to shape the descriptors.

## 4. Shaping the meta-descriptors

### 4.1 Early shaping decisions

Early in the discussions the following decisions strengthened the frame and guided the evolution of the matrix:

- The descriptors need to be explicit about the learning outcomes approach and relevance to formal, non-formal and informal learning hence the wording introducing each level: “Level 1: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include...”
- The descriptors should not create the impression that higher levels are favoured. The matrix changed to show Level 1 at the top of the matrix.
- Each level and domain need to be unpacked in the matrix to show the various sub-elements and to check that there was no duplication and to ensure that the terms are consistent with the domain definitions.
- Conceptual clarity across levels and domains must be ensured to show the vertical progression in complexity, and horizontal consistency within and across levels.
- A glossary must be created alongside the matrix to assist users to interpret and apply the descriptor concepts.

### 4.2 Shaping the domain descriptors (vertical logic)

#### 4.2.1 Definitions

The definitions of each of the domains evolved as the descriptions of the levels evolved. A key practice was to ensure that the definition was clear, future-oriented, generically applicable across all types of learning and consistent with the domain descriptions.

#### 4.2.2 Knowledge

The knowledge domain seemed the simplest place to start, with only two sub-domains/elements namely “*type of knowledge*” and “*scope of knowledge*”. Some changes included:

- tightening the definition
- ensuring that the descriptions were generic
- examining the use of the word “*basic*” and reserving it for level 2 (L2) knowledge,
- introducing a “*simple*” description of knowledge at L1, the lowest level of complexity
- agreeing that L5 (midway) knowledge is “*mainly technical or theoretical with substantial depth*”
- agreeing that a “*substantial and original knowledge contribution*” was indicative of the highest level of complexity, with a scope “*that extends the forefront of a discipline/area and/or at the interface between disciplines/areas*”
- ensuring that a vertical logic model was applied meaning that between L1 and L10 the knowledge was cumulative, and each level was clearly distinguishable from the level below and the level above.

### 4.2.3 Skills

There were many discussions to shape a future-oriented definition of skills in the ACQF context. Eventually the definition was tightened to provide for “*cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills*”. The skills sub-domains/elements include “*type of skills*”, “*response to information*” and “*addressing types of problems*”.

The vertical logic model was applied to ensure that descriptions were cumulative and showed progression in complexity from the lowest to highest level. An example of the progression in complexity (L1 to L10) of a skills sub-element “*types of problems*” is shown below:

L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	L7	L8	L9	L10
simple	straightforward	familiar	varied	unfamiliar	complex and sometimes abstract	complex and abstract	highly complex	mastery	emergent, new

The sequencing moves from “simple” at the lowest level of complexity (L1) to “unfamiliar” at L5 (midway) to “emergent/new” at the highest complexity level (L10).

Using the vertical logic model it was agreed that progression in complexity in:

- “*type of skills*” moves from *simple communication, cognitive and practical skills* at the lowest level of complexity (L1) to “*a range of well-developed technical skills with some specialisation*” at L5 (midway) to “*expert skills and techniques*” at the highest complexity (L10)
- “*response to information*” moves from “*following simple instructions*” at the lowest complexity (L1) to “*analysing information and new ideas and constructing and communicating coherent arguments*” at L5 (midway) to “*innovation, interpretation and creation of emergent and new ideas*” at the highest complexity (L10)
- “*addressing types of problems*” moves from “*using simple repetitive solutions to address simple problems*” at the lowest complexity (L1) to “*applying a range of solutions often in combination to address unfamiliar problems* at L5 (midway) to “*critically evaluating, formulating and testing theories to address emergent, new and critical problems*” at the highest complexity (L10).

Similar to the application in the knowledge domain, the changes included:

- ensuring that the descriptions were generic and future-oriented
- ensuring that the vertical logic model was consistently applied between L1 and L10 and that each level was clearly distinguishable from the level below and the level above.

### 4.2.4 Autonomy and responsibility

There were many discussions to ensure clarity of concepts in this domain. The definition evolved into a simple one which referred to the “*context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility (A&R)*”. The A&R domain is inclusive of 3 sub-domains/ elements:

- “*the context in which autonomy and responsibility is applied*”,
- “*the extent to which autonomy is applied*” and
- “*the extent to which responsibility is applied*”. Responsibility further includes three elements: “*responsibility for self*”, “*responsibility for group outcomes*” and “*responsibility for resources*”.

Using the vertical logical model, it was agreed that progression in complexity in:

- “*context*” moves from “*highly structured and repetitive*” at the lowest complexity (L1) to “*unpredictable*” at L5 (midway) to “*emergent, new contexts*” at the highest complexity (L10)
- “*application of autonomy*” grows from “*close supervision and guidance*” at the lowest complexity (L1) to “*full autonomy*” at Level 5 (midway) to “*expertise*” at the highest complexity (L10)
- “*application of responsibility*” grows from “*minimal responsibility for self*” at the lowest complexity (L1) to “*full responsibility (self and group outcomes)/initiative for responsibility for others*” at L5 (midway) to “*expertise in management of new ideas*” at the highest complexity (L10).

Similar to the application in the knowledge and skills domain, the changes included:

- ensuring that the descriptions were generic
- ensuring that the vertical logic model was consistently applied between L1 and L10 and that each level was clearly distinguishable from the level below and the level above.

### 4.3 Shaping the levels (horizontal logic)

The horizontal logic involved looking across each level to ensure the consistency in complexity per level. It was also possible to highlight keywords for each level, for example:

Level	Key words signifying the difference in complexity (by levels)
Level 1	<i>“simple”, “repetitive”, “highly structured”, “close”, “minimal”</i>
Level 2	<i>“basic”, “concrete”, “known”, “straight forward”, “structured”, “limited”</i>
Level 3	<i>“factual and operational”, “range of skills”, “interpret”, “select and use”, “familiar”, “predictable”, “routine”, “initiative”</i>
Level 4	<i>“incorporating theoretical”, “well-developed technical”, “make informed judgements”, “varied”, “full responsibility for self”</i>
Level 5	<i>“substantial depth”, “range... with some specialisation”, “coherent argument”, “range of solutions”, “unfamiliar”, “unpredictable”, “full autonomy and full responsibility for self and group outcomes”</i>
Level 6	<i>“highly technical and specialised”, “formulate or adapt”, “complex and sometimes abstract”, “highly variable”, “well developed autonomy”, “responsibility for self, group outcomes, resources, processes”</i>
Level 7	<i>“advanced analytical or specialised”, “new insights”, “advanced solutions”, “complex and abstract”, “complex and variable”, “advanced autonomy and responsibility”</i>
Level 8	<i>“highly advanced”, “highly complex and abstract”</i>
Level 9	<i>“mastery”, “at the forefront”, “formulate and test theories”, “highly specialised”</i>
Level 10	<i>“substantial and original”, “at the interface”, “expert”, “emergent, new”</i>

## 5. ACQF Level descriptors matrix

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 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

## 6. Next steps

The ACQF descriptors are presented as a matrix of formal, non-formal and informal learning structured over ten levels and three domains: knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility. They define and clarify the vertical and horizontal logic of the ACQF learning outcomes and embrace all types and levels of qualifications.

A first draft (based on research and consultation) of the ACQF meta-descriptors was presented to the 4<sup>th</sup> ACQF AG in January 2022. The next step is to revise and improve the descriptors through testing and consultation. Testing the descriptors will allow for a deepening of the understanding of the learning outcomes based descriptors and also to collate responses. The valuable experience that will be gained during the consultation and testing phase will be used to finetune and improve the level descriptors.

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