

## 5. What are level descriptors, and how do they relate to assessment?

Level descriptors give general descriptions of the nature and characteristics of learning at a particular level in the NQF. They do this through identifying a progressive hierarchy of achievement – that is, they aim at describing growth from the simple to the more complex in relation to learning and applying knowledge and skills. They are aimed at developing a common understanding of what a particular level of achievement means across different fields but at the same level. Level descriptors can be applied as assessment criteria to any evidence generated by assessment, along with the specific criteria for a particular learning achievement.

The difficulties of finding a common generic principle of description that will apply across different contexts, disciplines and fields have been well documented in South African debates. Some of the approaches that have been tried include indicators such as responsibility and autonomy levels, cognitive complexity, or contextual understanding.

The NQF was originally designed with eight levels, but the Draft NQF Bill proposes a ten level NQF. The Explanatory Memorandum to this Bill notes the following:

The initial organisation of the NQF in eight levels proved too constraining, and a consensus was achieved during the review process that a framework of ten levels would cover all requirements. ....

Each level has a level descriptor which specifies the nature of the learning achievement deemed appropriate for that level. This is the case at present and the Bill recognises this essential feature of a qualification framework. Sub-clause (4) requires that level descriptors be developed separately for each sub-framework of the NQF.

(Explanatory Memorandum, Government Gazette 15 February 2008 p.26)

For more information read the NQF Draft Bill and the NQF Level Descriptors. Some of the conceptual debates are covered in texts in the Useful Background Section.

[Answer to FAQ 5, The NQF and Assessment, the NQF Gateway]