CIMSPA®

Education Product Development Guidance

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This Education Product Development Guidance enables the creation of endorsed, quality-assured education products that deliver and increase professional status for the sport and physical activity workforce.

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Introduction

Education systems across the UK and internationally use established frameworks and level descriptors to define learning achievement, complexity and progression. These frameworks underpin:

- the classification of qualifications and academic awards
- the articulation of learning demand and cognitive challenge
- the design of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
- the alignment between education and employment.

A range of recognised frameworks are used for this purpose, including:

- Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF)
- Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)
- Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)
- European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
- Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)
- Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS)

While these frameworks are widely accepted, they differ in structure, terminology and level numbering. For example, a bachelor's degree is typically positioned at Level 6 in England, but at Level 9 or 10 within the SCQF.

Within the sport and physical activity sector, CIMSPA professional standards define the knowledge, understanding and skills required for occupational competence. However, these standards do not formally assign educational levels.

This creates a requirement for clear, consistent interpretation of level to support the development of education products that are both

- aligned to occupational requirements
- consistent with recognised education frameworks.

CIMSPA has developed this Product Development Guidance to address this need. It provides:

- a sector-specific framework for interpreting level of occupational practice
- a structured approach to aligning professional standards with education provision
- a mechanism for ensuring consistency across education products submitted for endorsement.

This guidance draws on a range of established current and previous framework approaches, such as:

- Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)
- European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
- Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)
- Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS)
- Ofqual General Conditions of Recognition (Ofqual Handbook: Section E: Level Requirements)
- Ofqual "Qualifications and Component Levels" guidance
- Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) levelling tools
- SEEC (UK Alliance) level descriptors
- Vocational Education and Training (VET) frameworks

Position of this guidance

This document does not replace existing education frameworks. Instead, it provides a translation layer between professional standards and educational level.

Specifically, it supports education partners to:

- interpret the level of occupational competence defined by CIMSPA professional standards
- apply consistent level descriptors
- align education products with external framework requirements
- meet CIMSPA endorsement requirements.

Purpose

This guidance document is designed to assist education partners in the development of education products for endorsement against CIMSPA professional standards.

It provides a clear, practical and consistent approach to designing education products that:

- align to the relevant CIMSPA professional standard(s)
- reflect the knowledge, understanding and skills required by the sector
- apply the appropriate level descriptor
- align to the CIMSPA Standards for Deployment Policy
- meet CIMSPA endorsement requirements
- align with external education frameworks (for example, Ofqual, FHEQ, SCQF).

Endorsement requirements

Education products must demonstrate:

- comprehensive coverage of knowledge, understanding and skills
- clear alignment to the relevant professional standard and associated level descriptor
- use of valid and effective assessment methods (where applicable).

Key principle

CIMSPA does not assign formal levels to professional standards.

Instead:

- each professional standard references an appropriate level descriptor drawn from this guidance.
- education partners must use these descriptors to inform the level of demand within their education product.
- where relevant, the final education product must align with external frameworks (for example, Ofqual, FHEQ, SCQF).

Level descriptors are intended to be directive rather than prescriptive. They:

- provide a benchmark for level of demand
- support consistent interpretation of role expectations
- should inform design decisions without being reproduced verbatim.

How this guidance works with other documents

This guidance forms part of a wider system used to design and endorse education products and must be read and used in conjunction with:

Document	Purpose
The relevant professional standard(s)	Define the knowledge, understanding and skills required for the role
This Education Product Development Guidance	Defines the expected level of demand through level descriptors
Standards for Deployment Policy	Defines scope of practice, safety, and role-based restrictions
The relevant CIMSPA Partner Endorsement guide	Sets out the requirements and evidence needed for CIMSPA endorsement
External frameworks (For example, Ofqual, FHEQ, SCQF)	Define the formal education level and achievement expectations

How to use this guidance

Education partners should use this guidance as part of a joined-up design process, integrating CIMSPA professional standards, policies and external education frameworks.

This process ensures that education products are:

- occupationally relevant
- educationally robust
- aligned to CIMSPA endorsement requirements.

The three step process

Step 1 - Identify the professional standard(s)

- Select the relevant CIMSPA professional standard(s).
- Review required Knowledge, Understanding and Skills (competency statements or Learning and Development Requirements).
- Review the standard-specific product development guidance included within the professional standard.
- Use the Standards for Deployment Policy to understand:
  - the scope of the role
  - any restrictions or exclusions
  - requirements for safe and effective practice.

This step defines what the learner must know and be able to do through the education product.

Step 2 - Interpret the level descriptor and context

- Locate the level descriptor stated within the professional standard.
- Use this descriptor to understand expectations across the following domains:
  - context of practice
  - autonomy and responsibility
  - knowledge and understanding
  - skills (cognitive, practical and technical)
  - application and problem solving
  - communication and professional practice.
- Review the standard-specific product development guidance to understand how these expectations apply to the education product (for example, assessment requirements).
- Consider the operational context of the role. Education products must consider:
  - any prescribed environment, context or specialism required for the role
  - any additional requirements or restrictions defined by legitimate third parties (for example, sport governing bodies) or legal or regulatory requirements
  - any pre-requisites or prior experience required for entry
  - the typical learner profile and expected prior attainment
  - any risk considerations, including controls required under Standards for Deployment.
- Where relevant, cross-reference with external education frameworks to ensure alignment of level expectations.

This step defines the level of demand, complexity and context in which the role is performed.

Step 3 - Design the education product

Using the professional standard, level descriptor, and contextual requirements:

- Develop learning outcomes aligned to Knowledge, Understanding and Skills competency statements or learning and developing requirements, and level descriptor expectations.
- Design assessment methods that are valid for the level of demand and relevant to the occupational context.
- Define entry requirements and progression pathways.
- Ensure the education product meets endorsement requirements outlined in the relevant CIMSPA Partner Endorsement guide.

These steps ensure an education product is:

- fit for purpose
- aligned to CIMSPA endorsement requirements
- aligned to both sector needs and education frameworks.

Using level descriptors

Education partners should use level descriptors to inform the design and demand of the education product, not to determine or assign level.

Education products should reflect the:

- complexity of tasks and problem-solving required
- degree of autonomy and responsibility expected
- depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding.

Level descriptors are intended to support interpretation and benchmarking, not replication.

Education partners must not:

- attempt to assign or re-determine the level
- reinterpret the descriptor outside of its intended meaning
- copy descriptor language directly into product design without contextualisation.

Instead, education partners must ensure that:

- the learning, delivery and assessment collectively reflect the level of demand described.

CIMSPA level descriptors

Education partners should interpret level using the domains below.

Each professional standard will reference a specific level descriptor from the below table.

How to use the table

Read down the relevant level column, using all domains collectively to interpret the expected level of demand.

CIMSPA level descriptors

Domain	Technical Group 1 Practitioner (Level 2)	Technical Group 2 Practitioner (Level 3)	Higher Technical (Level 4)	Professional (Level 5)	Chartered (Level 6)	Strategic / Executive (Level 7)
1. Context of practice	Structured, familiar environments	Predictable, defined environments	Broader, defined but more complex environments	Varied and sometimes unpredictable environments	Complex organisational environments	Strategic, organisational and sector-wide environments
2. Autonomy and responsibility	Works under supervision; responsibility for own tasks	Works independently within defined scope	Responsible for own work and may supervise others	Responsible for teams and outcomes	Leads organisational activity and major initiatives	Full autonomy; leads strategic direction and transformation
3. Knowledge and understanding	Basic factual and procedural knowledge	Broad factual, procedural and theoretical knowledge	Technical, theoretical and analytical knowledge	Integrated theoretical and practical knowledge	Advanced knowledge, including aspects at the forefront of the field	Specialist, critical and cutting-edge knowledge
4. Skills (cognitive, practical and technical)	Applies routine and standard procedures	Applies technical skills with some complexity and variation	Applies technical and conceptual skills to complex tasks	Applies advanced methods and approaches	Applies advanced analytical and enquiry techniques	Designs and leads innovation, research and transformation
5. Application and problem solving	Solves straightforward problems in familiar contexts	Solves varied and sometimes non-routine problems	Solves complex but well-defined problems	Solves complex and unpredictable problems	Solves multi-faceted problems with interacting factors	Addresses highly complex, ambiguous and strategic challenges
6. Communication and professional practice	Communicates in familiar contexts; basic professional awareness	Communicates using structured approaches; applies ethical awareness	Communicates effectively; adapts behaviour; applies judgement	Communicates across teams; leads decision-making	Communicates complex ideas to varied audiences	Influences stakeholders; leads culture, strategy and change

Alignment with external frameworks

CIMSPA level descriptors provide a sector-specific interpretation of occupational competence, while external frameworks define the level of educational achievement.

Alignment between these ensures that education products:

- reflect real-world role requirements
- meet recognised education standards
- support progression across learning and employment pathways.

Level alignment overview

CIMSPA level descriptors broadly align to external frameworks as follows:

CIMSPA Level descriptors	RQF	FHEQ	SCQF	EQF	Typical educational alignment
Technical Group 1 Practitioner (Level 2)	Level 2	Below HE	Level 5	Level 2	GCSE / Level 2 qualifications
Technical Group 2 Practitioner (Level 3)	Level 3	Below HE	Level 6	Level 3	A Level / Level 3 qualifications
Higher Technical (Level 4)	Level 4	Level 4	Level 7	Level 4	Certificate of Higher Education / HNC
Professional (Level 5)	Level 5	Level 5	Level 8	Level 5	Diploma of Higher Education / Foundation Degree
Chartered (Level 6)	Level 6	Level 6	Level 9–10	Level 6	Bachelor's Degree
Strategic / Executive (Level 7)	Level 7	Level 7	Level 11	Level 7	Master's Degree

Descripter model

CIMSPA uses a domain-based descriptor model to define level descriptors. These domains align conceptually with those used in external frameworks:

CIMSPA domain	Equivalent in external frameworks
Context of practice	Application of knowledge in context
Autonomy and responsibility	Responsibility / independence
Knowledge and understanding	Knowledge
Skills (cognitive, practical and technical)	Skills (cognitive and applied)
Application and problem solving	Analytical and problem-solving skills
Communication and professional practice	Communication, transferable and professional skills

References

Ofqual Handbook: General Conditions of Recognition 'Section E- Design and development of qualifications: Level requirements (including level descriptors)

https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications

Credit level descriptors for higher education (SEEC 2016)

https://www.seec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SEEC-descriptors-2016.pdf

The Frameworks for Higher Education UK

https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/qualifications-frameworks

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education; Occupational Level Guide

https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/developing-new-apprenticeships/resources/occupational-level-guide/

Ofqual (withdrawn) Qualification and Component Levels

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/734361/qualification-and-component-levels.pdf

Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework levels diagram

https://scqf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/framework-diagram-a3-web-mar-2024.pdf

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework; Employer Guide and Levelling Tool:

https://scqf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/employer-level-tool-web-2024.pdf

Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)

European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

European comparisons via the European Qualifications Framework(EQF)

Product Development Guidance for CIMSPA Education Partners

Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Glossary of terms

Term	Explanation
Professional standard	These outline the minimum knowledge, skills, and behaviours an individual must understand and demonstrate for every occupation and job role in the sector.
Level descriptors	These are statements that describe the learning outcomes and assessment criteria for a specific level of a qualifications framework.
Education Partners	Refers to CIMSPA Education Partners including Awarding Organisations, Higher Education Institutes, Further Education Colleges, Training Providers and Sporting Governing Bodies.
Ofqual	The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) regulates qualifications, examinations, and assessments in England.
Framework	A system that classifies qualifications into levels based on the knowledge, skills, and abilities required at each level.
Education products	Refers to degree programmes, continuous professional development (CPD), training programmes, vocational programmes, professional qualifications and regulated qualifications.

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