

Descriptors- Their uses and purposes

The need for competence descriptors

A democratic culture relies on citizens having the values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding that are described by the competence model. Two elements are essential to ensuring the development of CDC in learners:

1. the possibility to assess the current level of proficiency of learners on each of the competences, with a view to identifying their learning needs and areas for further development; and
2. references for educators which can help them to design, implement and evaluate educational interventions, in formal and non-formal settings.

In order to meet these needs, the Framework provides descriptors for each of the 20 competences that are contained in the competence model. These descriptors help to operationalise the competences and provide important and useful tools for curriculum planning, teaching and learning, and assessment. Competence descriptors are statements that describe observable behaviours which indicate that the person concerned has achieved a certain level of proficiency with regard to a competence. In order for descriptors to be relevant for curriculum planning, teaching and learning, and assessment, they need to be formulated using the language of learning outcomes.

How the descriptors were developed

The following criteria were used to formulate the descriptors for the Framework:

- *Wording*: descriptors had to be formulated using the language of learning outcomes, starting with one unambiguous action verb and describing an observable behaviour connected with a learning achievement.
- *Brevity*: descriptors had to be short rather than long, ideally no longer than about 25 words.
- *Positivity*: each descriptor had to express ability in terms of a positive statement (e.g. can, expresses, supports), not a negative statement (e.g. cannot, fails to, has limited). Ideally, the aim was to ensure that each descriptor would enable a teacher to say “Yes, this person can do this/has this (value, attitude, skill, knowledge, understanding)” or “No, this person cannot do this/does not have this (value, attitude, skill, knowledge, understanding)”.
- *Clarity*: each descriptor had to be transparent and not jargon-laden and written using relatively simple grammar.
- *Independence*: each descriptor had to be independent of all the other descriptors. In other words, each descriptor could not have meaning only relative to other descriptors in the set. For this reason, the descriptors avoided using the same statement multiple times to form a set by simply substituting a qualifying word or phrase across the statements (e.g. poor/moderate/good, a few/some/ many/most, fairly broad/very broad) which would have meant that the items were not independent of each other.
- *Definiteness*: each descriptor also needed to describe concrete behaviours or achievements which would indicate whether or not the relevant value / attitude / skill / knowledge / understanding had been mastered by an individual.



Using these criteria, an initial set of 2 085 draft descriptors covering all 20 competences was produced. These descriptors were progressively reduced in number and refined in their wording using a series of feedback and rating tasks, validation tasks and scaling tasks, in which 3 094 educational practitioners drawn from across Europe participated. The data from these tasks were used to identify a set of 447 validated and highly rated descriptors and a smaller set of 135 key descriptors that were judged to be especially useful for indexing the achievement of the 20 competences contained in the Framework model.¹

The data collected from the educational practitioners were also used to scale the descriptors to three different levels of proficiency: a basic, intermediate and advanced level of proficiency. It was found that many of the descriptors could be clearly associated with just one of these three levels of proficiency. However, some descriptors, although found to be valid, were revealed by the scaling procedure to fall either between the basic and intermediate levels or between the intermediate and advanced levels.

Through this extensive empirical work, scaled descriptors were established for each of the 20 competences. These descriptors indicate that a person displaying the respective behaviour in a consistent way will have a high probability of having achieved the corresponding level of proficiency (basic, intermediate or advanced) for the respective competence. The full lists of key descriptors and the larger bank of validated descriptors are presented in Volume 2 of the current publication and are also available online on the webpage of the Council of Europe dedicated to the Framework.

For illustrative purposes, examples of scaled key descriptors for two competences are presented here in Boxes 1 and 2.

Box 1: Key descriptors for skills of listening and observing

- Basic level of proficiency
 - Listens attentively to other people
 - Listens carefully to differing opinions
- Intermediate level of proficiency
 - Can listen effectively in order to decipher another person's meanings and intentions
 - Watches speakers' gestures and general body language to help himself/ herself to figure out the meaning of what they are saying
- Advanced level of proficiency
 - Pays attention to what other people imply but do not say
 - Notices how people with other cultural affiliations react in different ways to the same situation

¹ A full description of the process through which the descriptors were developed is provided in Volume 2 of the current publication.



Box 2: Key descriptors for knowledge and critical understanding of politics, law and human rights

- Basic level of proficiency
 - Can explain the meaning of basic political concepts, including democracy, freedom, citizenship, rights and responsibilities
 - Can explain why everybody has a responsibility to respect the human rights of others
- Intermediate level of proficiency
 - Can explain the universal, inalienable and indivisible nature of human rights
 - Can reflect critically on the root causes of human rights violations, including the role of stereotypes and prejudice in processes that lead to human rights abuses
- Advanced level of proficiency
 - Can describe the diverse ways in which citizens can influence policy
 - Can reflect critically on the evolving nature of the human rights framework and the ongoing development of human rights in different regions of the world

Using the descriptors

The process of developing the descriptors therefore produced two sets of validated and scaled descriptors: the overall bank of 447 descriptors (with some descriptors connected to the three levels of proficiency and some descriptors situated in between these levels), and a reduced subset of 135 key descriptors that are clearly connected to each of the three levels of proficiency. A basic assumption (which rests on the statistical procedure used to scale the descriptors) is that if a person displays the behaviour corresponding to a descriptor at the advanced level, then it is highly probable that this person will also be able to display the behaviours corresponding to the descriptors at the intermediate and basic levels for the same competence.

There are several uses that can be made of both lists of descriptors. However, there are also some potential misuses that should be avoided.

Descriptors can be used in different ways in the context of formal education and non-formal education. As they are formulated in the language of learning outcomes, they are directly relevant as references for curriculum development at different levels, from national curricula to school-based curricula, as well as for the design, implementation and evaluation of learning activities.

Because competences are usually mobilised in clusters, educators can design learning activities that create opportunities for learners to display and to practise the behaviours associated with combinations of descriptors from different competences. These activities will therefore contribute to the development of those competences. However, descriptors can also be a source of inspiration for educators in designing educational activities and learning outcomes can also be defined by combining and adapting existing descriptors.

This simplifies the task for educators in covering, with relevant learning opportunities, as many as possible of the 20 competences. It would be incorrect to assume that educators should aim to cover



with separate learning activities each of the 447 descriptors or even the 135 key descriptors.

First, the bank of descriptors should be seen as a toolbox from which to pick and combine the most relevant elements considering the level of the learners and their specific context. The bank should not be seen as a “to-do list”. Second, when choosing the most relevant descriptors to set as expected learning outcomes, educators should consider that learning activities need to provide meaningful opportunities for all learners to move to higher levels of proficiency or to stabilise and consolidate proficiency for various competences. Thus, the target should not be set too high, by focusing on advanced level descriptors when large numbers of learners are not prepared for this, nor should it be set too low, by picking only descriptors at the basic level when the possibilities of learners are higher.

This is also connected to another important use of descriptors, namely assessment. Because they are learning outcomes, it is appropriate for the descriptors to be used as a reference for assessment purposes. However, it should be underlined that the descriptors refer to proficiency and not to performance in a single specific situation.

Thus, it is possible that a learner displays by chance a certain behaviour in a specific context, for example in the context of a learning activity, but without reproducing this behaviour in other settings. Just observing a learner producing the behaviour reflected in a descriptor on a single occasion does not necessarily mean that the learner has achieved the level of proficiency indicated by that descriptor.

Reciprocally, the fact that a learner does not display in an educational situation the behaviour reflected in a descriptor is not enough to draw the conclusion that the learner has a lower level of proficiency. It may be the case that in the specific situation, at that particular moment, the behaviour was not visible, but in other circumstances the learner would be able to display the relevant behaviour.

Additionally, because of the cumulative character of the descriptors (and the validity of the scaling, based on a robust statistical procedure), when conducting an assessment, educators do not need to use the lists of descriptors as checklists to make sure that they have all been covered. For example, if a learner displays in a consistent manner the behaviour that is reflected in a descriptor at the intermediate level for a particular competence, it is not necessary to check with the other descriptors at the intermediate level for that same competence or for the descriptors at the basic level because it is highly probable that they will have been mastered. Instead, the educator should check if the learner displays behaviours corresponding to the descriptors for that competence at the advanced level, and if those behaviours are not observed, this can then form the focus of future learning activities.

The use of descriptors, because they are formulated in positive terms, allows for recognising what learners can do, and the absence of behaviours should guide future interventions and not be used to label the learner in a negative manner. As can be seen by inspecting the scaled descriptors shown in Boxes 1 and 2, even the descriptors at the basic level still require a significant degree of proficiency.

Another risk of misuse is when the behaviour that is reflected in a descriptor at the basic level is not observed. It would be wrong to conclude that the learner does not have any level of proficiency. Even in this case, the learner may well have a certain level of proficiency, and the basic level descriptors can then be the next target for learning.

In addition to their various uses by educators in formal and non-formal settings, descriptors can also be useful for learners, in several possible ways.

As the Framework includes both self-efficacy and autonomous learning skills, learners can reflect on the descriptors for all 20 competences in order to plan and implement their own development

pathway. The list of descriptors can help to orient their learning goals in a scaffolded and achievable way, thus increasing the chances of success and their empowerment.

The descriptors are also relevant for self-assessment and as an aid for critical reflection on learning, whether this takes place in a formal, non-formal or informal educational setting. Learners can use the descriptors to consider how they have behaved in specific relevant situations in the past and what they could do in the future. With regard to the values, learners can also reflect on what would happen to society if citizens were to discount or reject the contents of the respective descriptors.

In conclusion, the descriptors represent a valuable tool for both educators and learners. The risks of potential misuse can be avoided if the principles and suggestions included in the guidance chapters in Volume 3 of the current publication – in particular, the chapters on curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and the whole-school approach – are taken into account. Users of the Framework are recommended to consult these chapters before using the descriptors