



CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (CDP) 2021

THEMATIC CDP BRIEFS **3.1**

Level descriptors in qualifications frameworks

OVERVIEW FROM 24 AFRICAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS



THE AFRICA-EU PARTNERSHIP
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AFRICAN CONTINENTAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (ACQF)

Capacity development programme (CDP) 2021



Thematic CDP brief 3.1

Level descriptors in qualifications frameworks

Overview from 24 African Qualifications Frameworks

This thematic brief provides a brief overview on level descriptors and a synthesis of the domains of level descriptors of 24 African Qualifications Frameworks (22 national and two regional). The comprehensive list of legal and technical documents of the mentioned African Qualifications Frameworks is included in the sources.

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LEVEL DESCRIPTORS: THE 'GLUE' IN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS?

In National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) and Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQF), each of the levels is described by a set of descriptors indicating the learner acquisitions (not the years of study). Level descriptors are formulated on the basis of horizontal logic (through the domains of learning) and vertical logic (progression from lower to higher levels). Level descriptors of NQFs and RQFs translate the nature and scope of the qualifications framework.

1.1 Understanding level descriptors

In the document 'Level descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework' (SAQA, 2012), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), states that the purpose of level descriptors (levels One to Ten) is to ensure coherence in learning achievement in the allocation of qualifications and part qualifications to particular levels, and to facilitate the assessment of the national and international comparability of qualifications and part qualifications.

SAQA (2012) defines level descriptors as follows:

'Level descriptor' means that statement describing learning achievement at a particular level of the NQF that provides a broad indication of the types of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are appropriate to a qualification at that level' (SAQA, 2012, p. 4)

In addition, SAQA (2012) notes:

- There is one common set of level descriptors for the NQF to be used in different contexts
- The NQF level descriptors are designed to meet the needs of academic as well as occupational qualifications
- Level descriptors are descriptive and not prescriptive
- Level descriptors do not describe years of study
- The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (ASEAN QRF) notes that learning outcomes are:

'A general statement that summarises the learning outcomes appropriate to a specific level in a qualifications framework. They are usually grouped in domains of learning' (ASEAN QRF, 2018, p. 31)

Level descriptors are formulated as learning outcomes, which are statements of what the learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at completion of a process and period of learning.

1.2 Uses and formulation of level descriptors

Level descriptors are fundamental elements of the technical-conceptual design of qualifications frameworks.

Level descriptors are designed to act as a guide and a starting point for, inter alia:

- Pegging a qualification at an appropriate level on the NQF, used together with purpose statements, outcomes and assessment criteria
- Writing learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria for qualifications and part qualifications
- Validation of acquired skills, knowledge, and competence against a particular level for an award
- Assisting learners to gain admission through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) at an appropriate level on the NQF (SAQA, 2012, pp 4-5).

Bahrain NQF (BQA) published a guidance note '[Using the NQF Level Descriptors](#)', clarifying how the role of level descriptors can be optimised in the real work of qualifications developers and assessors, noting their possibilities and limitations. A few suggestions from BQA (pp 1-2):

"NQF level descriptors are used along with other sources of information to place qualifications on the NQF. Other sources, which will become more widely available as qualifications, are placed on the NQF, include subject benchmarks, qualifications at the same level, and comparable qualifications on other frameworks.

NQF level descriptors are not qualification specifications. On the contrary, while level descriptors confirm learning outcomes for a series of predefined characteristics, qualification specifications (descriptors) set out:

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- ▶ What the learner is expected to do on successful completion of the qualification on the qualification structure i.e. level and number of units
- ▶ The minimum number and level of credits required at each level.

The NQF level descriptors are generic and equally applicable to academic, vocational and work-based qualifications. There will be qualifications with units that comprise learning outcomes at different levels, and it may also be that one or more of the sub-strands does not appear in particular units. A best-fit approach is used to determine the level of the units of a qualification on the NQF.

Professional judgement can be assisted by reading and becoming familiar with the level descriptors in order to make an informed determination as to where a qualification sits and to provide supporting rationales that can be understood by others who may not be expert in the subject/discipline area.

Although level descriptors can act as a useful guide when designing qualifications, it is not recommended that the design of a qualification be based solely on these descriptors.

It is important that qualifications are designed to meet the needs of learners and other stakeholders such as employers, universities and training institutions.”

To help with interpretation of the level descriptors, BQA developed a glossary of words and terms in which the meaning is provided specifically in relation to the NQF. To become familiar with the progressive nature of the language being used, it can be useful to consider and compare key words used within the level descriptors.

BQA provides guidance on the formulation of progression between levels. An example:

“At Level 4, learners would not cover all the theories of the subject/discipline, only some of them, with a decision on the eventual number being covered left to those designing the qualification. At Level 5, learners would cover more of the main theories. Theories are not directly referenced in Level 6, being already covered in Levels 4 and 5, but this does not prevent the continuance of activity relating to core theories at Level 6. At Level 7, learners would study more in-depth theories that are central to the subject/discipline.” (BQA, pg 2)



TOWARDS ACQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

The conceptual and technical design of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) will consider and be inspired by the objectives and principles defined in the vision.

2.1 A mix of success factors

Effectiveness, relevance and sustainability of the ACQF will be determined by a combination of factors, including:

- ▶ Fit-for-purpose architecture of key components, spanning from policy rationale to structural and conceptual design, technical tools, resources, and governance
- ▶ Buy-in of users and stakeholders
- ▶ Monitoring and finetuning
- ▶ Complementarity with quality assurance and recognition policies and institutions at national, regional and continental levels.

The ACQF conceptual and technical design will include and consider a number of key dimensions:

- ▶ **Purpose** - a continental meta-framework, working in synergy with relevant policies and aiming to: enhance transparency, quality and comparability of qualifications and qualifications frameworks; contribute to facilitate recognition of qualifications and eventually the mobility of learners and workers; to work in cooperation and complementarity with national and regional qualifications frameworks; promote trust and referencing with qualifications frameworks in Africa and other regions of the world.
- ▶ **Scope** - comprehensive and inclusive, based on principles to innovation, openness to good practice and stakeholders' needs
- ▶ **Levels and level descriptors** - structure of the ACQF as a meta-framework for comparison / referencing with NQFs and RQF.

➤ **Support and cooperation with countries** attuned to the stage of development of NQFs and RQFs on the continent.

2.2 Purpose of the ACQF as a meta-framework

As a meta-framework, the ACQF aims to contribute to a 'meta-transparency' of qualifications on the continent, and consequently to the aspired objective of fair mobility, and recognition of people's qualifications and skills in a lifelong learning perspective. The key working modalities of the ACQF are approximation, working together, mutual trust, common concepts, referencing/alignment and systematic articulation with recognition and quality assurance policies and institutions.

As a meta-framework, the ACQF aims to support approximation and common understanding between countries' qualifications frameworks. As a meta-framework for the African continent, the ACQF will work towards comparison, alignment / referencing and common reference milestones between NQFs (and RQFs) on the continent. The ACQF will support countries and RECs to meeting the key criteria and requirements for working together in the context of ACQF. As a meta-framework The ACQF will also act as a platform for mutual learning between African countries, and support developments at national (and REC) level enabling the establishment and implementation of qualifications frameworks, which are fit for national objectives and open to cooperation with other NQFs.

As a meta-framework the ACQF will support countries NQFs, but not replace them, nor will it work to standardize NQFs and qualifications on the continent. As a meta-framework, ACQF will contribute to change, but change happens effectively at national level, through the reform driven action of (functioning) NQFs. In other parts of the world, referencing to RQFs have been associated with change processes (review or development) at NQF level, which can be explained by a win-win combination of top-down (RQF-NQF) and bottom-up (NQF-RQF). The interaction of the two frameworks (RQF and NQF) generates self-managed processes of national dialogue, renewed reflection, screening of the national panorama of qualifications, identification of gaps and inconsistencies, and determination of adequate action (for the short and medium term).

This definition of the purpose of the ACQF as a meta-framework influences the orientation and scope of its level descriptors.

A question for further debate and decision: how should the ACQF be structured – 8 levels, 10 levels, other options? Should both types of level structures be considered and compared when developing ACQF level descriptors?

2.3 Level descriptors of the ACQF: a balancing act?

ACQF level descriptors will play a key role in alignment / referencing between NQFs (RQFs), in a process that comprises other complementary and fundamental components of transparency, namely: learning outcomes approach, recognition of learning in from non-formal and informal contexts, placement of qualifications in NQF levels and registers, quality assurance of qualifications and NQFs, and stakeholders' participation and endorsement.

To promote participation and inclusion of all NQFs in ACQF dialogue and referencing / alignment, the formulations of ACQF level descriptors ought to be general in scope but explicit in defining learning domains. Level descriptors ought to be generic and equally applicable to academic, vocational and work-based qualifications¹.

As the transformation of learning and of skills on demand occurs the ACQF must be able to support adaptation in accordance with its principle of innovation-readiness. To a certain extent, the ACQF must be future-proof. Can ACQF level descriptors include domains or subdomains supporting adaptation, innovation, transformation in terms of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes? Can certain dimensions of the global transformation of learning and the society be translated in ACQF level descriptors, such as digitalisation, greening, inclusion, and also citizenship and cultural aspects?

However, overly detailed and specific formulations might prevent many NQFs to find compatibility of their level descriptors with ACQF's. And this can lead to exclusion rather than to inclusion of all countries in the ACQF process. The ACQF is about inclusion of all countries' qualifications frameworks.

1. <https://www.bqa.gov.bh/En/QaaetUnits/NQFU/Documents/NQF%20Level%20Descriptors.pdf>



LEVEL DESCRIPTORS: OVERVIEW FROM AFRICAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

This chapter provides a synthetic mapping on level descriptors of 22 NQFs and two RQFs in Africa, based on the ACQF mapping study collection, and original country and regional sources (refer to Sources).

3.1 Domains of level descriptors

Many qualifications frameworks specify the meaning of their domains of learning:

- South African NQF (SANQF)
- France NQF
- Lesotho NQF
- European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
- Association of South-East Asian Nations Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)

TABLE 1: Definitions of domains of level descriptors - examples

Cases of National Qualifications Frameworks			
	DOMAIN		
SANQF	<p>The philosophical underpinning of the NQF and the level descriptors is ‘applied competence’, which is in line with the outcomes-based theoretical framework. Ten categories are used in the level descriptors to define ‘applied competencies’ across the ten levels of the NQF:</p> <p>1) Scope of knowledge; 2) Knowledge literacy; 3) Method and procedure; 4) Problem solving; 5) Ethics and professional practice; 6) Accessing, processing and managing information; 7) Producing and communicating of information; 8) Context and systems; 9) Management of learning; 10) Accountability.</p> <p>‘Applied competence’ has three constituent elements: a) foundational competence (intellectual / academic skills of knowledge together with analysis, synthesis and evaluation; b) practical competence (operational context); c) reflexive competence (learner autonomy).</p>		
France NQF	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>The descriptor refers to the progression of knowledge to carry out the professional activities of the level (processes, materials, terminology relating to one or more fields as well as theoretical knowledge)</p>	<p>Expertise</p> <p>The descriptor is about progression on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The complexity and technicality of a task, an activity in a process ➤ The level of mastery of professional activity ➤ Mobilizing a range of cognitive and practical skills ➤ Expertise in the field of communication and interpersonal relations, in the professional context ➤ The ability to pass on know-how 	<p>Responsibility and autonomy</p> <p>The descriptor relates to progress in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The organisation of work ➤ Reaction to contingency ➤ Understanding the complexity of the environment ➤ Understanding interactions in activities in other professional fields, allowing you to organize your own work, correct it or give directions to supervised staff ➤ Participation in collective work ➤ The level of supervision

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Cases of National Qualifications Frameworks			
	DOMAIN		
Lesotho NQF	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>Areas: Depth, breadth and complexity</p> <p>LQF applied notions of depth that operate on a continuum from general to specialised; breadth (single topic to multidisciplinary areas of knowledge); kinds of knowledge (concrete –abstract and segmented to accumulative); and lastly, complexity (combinations of kinds of depth and breadth of knowledge), as the criteria and lens of inquiry</p>	<p>Skills</p> <p>Nature: covering competencies of graduates</p>	<p>Agency and Context</p> <p>Personal and professional attributes expected to be displayed by graduates</p>
Cases of Regional Qualifications Frameworks			
EQF	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>In the context of EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.</p>	<p>Skills</p> <p>In the context of EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments)</p>	<p>Responsibility and autonomy</p> <p>In the context of the EQF responsibility and autonomy is described as the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility</p>
AQRF	Knowledge and skills		Application and responsibility

In the AQRF the level descriptors include the notion of competence as the ability to extend beyond the possession of knowledge and skills. It includes:

- Cognitive competence: involving the use of theory and concepts, as well as informal tacit knowledge gained experientially
- Functional competence (skills or know-how); those things that a person should be able to do when they work in a given area
- Personal competence: involving knowing to conduct oneself in a specific situation

- Ethical competence: involving the possession of certain personal and professional values.

2.2 Overview of levels and level descriptors in a selection of African NQF

The roots of the ACQF are the African NQFs – national and regional, with their diversity and multiple points of intersection. NQFs in Africa are at different stages of development and implementation. Table 2 summarises the state-of-play as identified by the ACQF mapping study and complementary sources (until end 2020).

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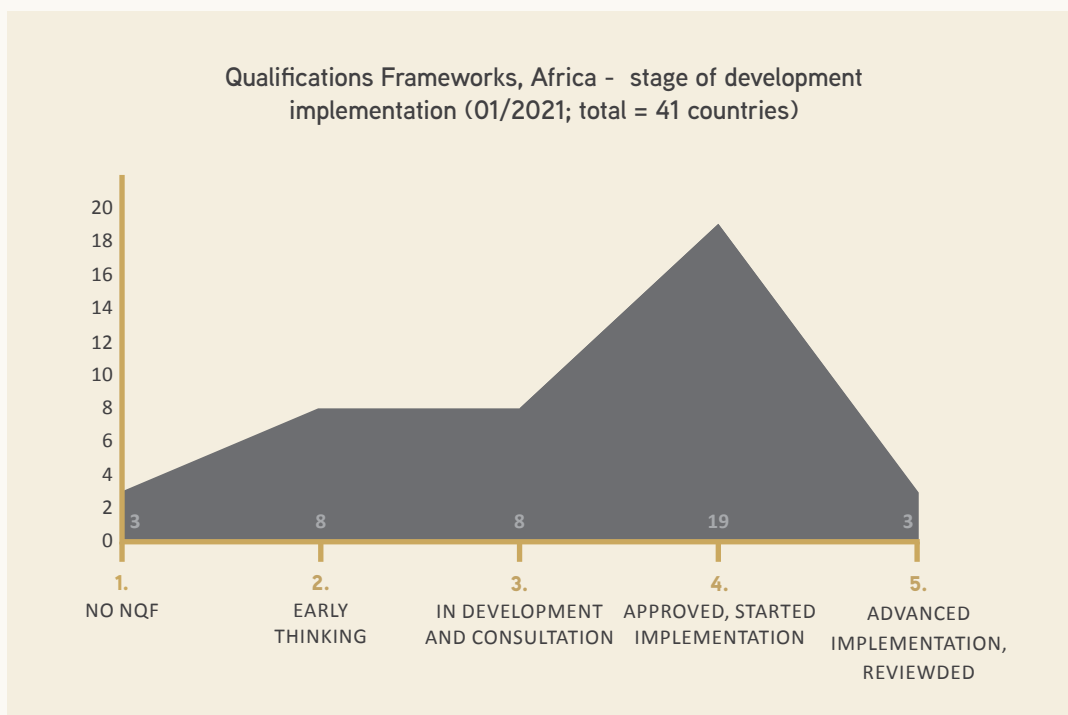
TABLE 2: qualifications frameworks in Africa - by stage of development and implementation - overview (end 2020).

Highlighted: countries with qualifications framework of sectoral scope (mostly focused on qualifications of TVET systems)

STAGE OF NQF DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION	COUNTRIES
1. No NQF	Chad, Republic of Congo, SãoTomé e Príncipe
2. NQF in early thinking	Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Union of Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Guiné-Bissau, Mali, Togo
3. NQF in development and consultation	Angola, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Madagascar, Morocco, Sierra Leone, Somalia
4. NQF legal act approved, implementation started	Botswana, Eswatini, Ethiopia, The Gambia , Ghana , Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi , Mozambique , Namibia, Nigeria , Rwanda, Senegal , Seychelles, Tanzania , Tunisia, Uganda , Zambia, Zimbabwe
5. NQF in advanced implementation and reviewed	Cape Verde, Mauritius, South Africa

Source: dataset of ACQF Mapping study

FIGURE 1: Overview – distribution of qualifications frameworks by stages of development and implementation



Source: dataset of ACQF Mapping study

A summarised comparison of levels and level descriptors in African NQFs and RQFs (Table 3) provides a general panorama on important commonalities, as well as differences, which matter for the development of ACQF levels and descriptors.

It is worth noting the predominance of NQFs of ten levels, and that of the domains Knowledge-skills-competence and Knowledge-skills-autonomy and responsibility.

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TABLE 3: overview of levels and domains of level descriptors in a selection of 22 African Qualifications Frameworks (National comprehensive; Sectoral – TVET and Higher education)

Key: **K** (Knowledge); **S** (Skills); **AR** or **RA** (Autonomy, responsibility); **C** (Competence); **A** (Attitude)

COUNTRY QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK LEAD BODY	TYPE OF QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK	NUMBER OF LEVELS OF THE QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK	DOMAINS OF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS
ANGOLA UTG-PNFQ	National, comprehensive. In approval process	10	K-S-AR
BOTSWANA Botswana Qualifications Authority	Botswana National Credit and Qualifications Framework. Comprehensive.	10	K-S-C
CAPE VERDE Unidade de Coordenação-Sistema Nacional de Qualificações (UC-SNQ)	National, comprehensive. In 2018 was reviewed legislation on the NQS and in 2020 on the NQF and National Catalogue of Qualifications.	8	K-S-Attitudes (Responsibility and Autonomy)
EGYPT National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (NAQAAE)	National, comprehensive. In approval process	8	K and Understanding-S-C
ESWATINI Higher Education Council	National, comprehensive.	10	K-S-Personal attitudes
ETHIOPIA	a) TVET QF b) National, comprehensive NQF	5 8	a) Problem solving capability/ information processing; Level of Accountability, responsibility and autonomy; Level of Knowledge and skills; Level of tasks / operational environment b) K-S-A
GHANA COTVET-Council for TVET	National TVET Qualifications Frameworks	8	Knowledge; requirements (skills and attitudes)
KENYA Kenya National Qualifications Authority (KNQA)	National, comprehensive.	10	K-S-C
LESOTHO Lesotho Qualifications and Quality Council	National, comprehensive.	10	Areas of knowledge (depth, breadth, complexity); nature of skills (covering competencies of graduates); agency and context
MALAWI	a) TVET QF - TQF (since 2004) b) Higher education QF (draft) c) Comprehensive NQF (in development)	8 5 10	Level descriptors HE QF and comprehensive NQF – in development

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COUNTRY QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK LEAD BODY	TYPE OF QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK	NUMBER OF LEVELS OF THE QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK	DOMAINS OF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS
MAURITIUS Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA)	National, comprehensive	10	Learning demand – processes
MOROCCO NQF Instance - Ministry National Education Vocational Training Higher Educations and Scientific Research	National, comprehensive. In development process	8	Knowledge, skills, complexity, autonomy-responsibility, adaptability, communication
MOZAMBIQUE Conselho Nacional da Avaliação de Qualidade do Ensino Superior (CNAQ) - (Higher Education) Autoridade Nacional da Educação Profissional (ANEP)	a) Comprehensive NQF (in consultation) b) HE: QUANCES c) TVET: QNQP	10 3 5	a) Integrated NQF: K-S-AR; b) HE QF: K-S-C; c) TVET QF: K-S-AR
NIGERIA National Board for Technical Education (NBTE)	TVET: National Skills Framework	6	Competence, skills, autonomy
RWANDA	a) Rwanda NQF - comprehensive b) Rwanda Education Qualifications Framework (REQF) – in review, development	8 10	Knowledge and understanding; Practice; applied knowledge and understanding; Generic cognitive skills; communication, ICT and numeracy skills; autonomy, responsibility and working with others.
SEYCHELLES Seychelles Qualifications Authority (SQA)	National, comprehensive	10	Degree of complexity; reasoning & problem solving; knowledge; AR
SOUTH AFRICA SAQA	National, comprehensive	10	Applied competencies: Scope of knowledge; Knowledge literacy; Method and procedure; Problem solving; Ethics and professional practice; Accessing, processing and managing information; Producing and communicating information; Context and systems; Management of learning; Accountability.
TANZANIA Tanzania Commission for Universities	Higher education	5 (6 to 10)	Complexity, autonomy, responsibility, adaptability, knowledge, and behaviour.
TUNISIA Ministry of Vocational Training and Labour	National, comprehensive	7	Complexity, autonomy, responsibility, adaptability, knowledge, and behaviour.

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COUNTRY QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK LEAD BODY	TYPE OF QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK	NUMBER OF LEVELS OF THE QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK	DOMAINS OF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS
UGANDA BTVET	TVET: Uganda Vocational Qualifications Framework (UVQF)	5 + 1 entry level	Domains not segregated, and include: knowledge, skills, autonomy, control
ZAMBIA Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZQA)	National, comprehensive	10	Foundational competence; practical competence; Reflexive competence
ZIMBABWE National Alignment Committee	National, comprehensive	10	Domains not segregated, and include: knowledge, skills, autonomy, control
SADCQF SADC Secretariat , TCCA	Regional, comprehensive	10	K-S-AR
EAST AFRICA COMMUNITY EAQFHE	Regional, comprehensive – higher education part in implementation.	8	Development of knowledge and understanding; Cognitive and intellectual skills; Key transferable skills; Practical skills

Consultation of the original legal and policy texts defining the qualifications frameworks of the indicated African countries is useful to stimulate reflection on differences and similarities in addressing the role and place of level descriptors, and their linkage with the objectives and components of the qualifications frameworks. Refer to Chapter 4 (Sources, Part I).

A number of issues need to be considered in further development and design of ACQF level descriptors. Firstly, the underlying theories in writing learning outcomes should be

clearly identified, namely the result-oriented behaviouristic approach and the process-oriented constructivist one, and their assumptions regarding learner acquisitions. Their interplay in describing levels of learning outcomes is key as learning acquisitions increase and cumulate. The supposed tension between the two theories occurs in the case of an approach that opposes one to the other, instead of complementing one another, in engineering the hierarchy in levels' progression.

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Thematic brief drafted by: Eduarda Castel-Branco, 25/05/2021. ecb@etf.europa.eu

Send us your questions and suggestions!
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