

Framework Guidance Note 2: What are the UK Professional Standards Framework Descriptors?

The HEA has developed a series of Guidance Notes to support the effective use of the 2011 Framework. These are intended as a dynamic and developmental set of documents. They will be extended and amended over time in response to the needs of the learning and teaching community.

The Guidance Notes answer the following questions:

1. What is the UKPSF? An introduction and overview.
2. **What are the Descriptors?**
3. What are the Dimensions?
4. How has the Framework changed?
5. In what ways can the Framework be used?
6. Accreditation

The UKPSF provides a general description of the main dimensions of the roles of teaching and supporting learning within the HE environment. It is written from the perspective of the practitioner and outlines a national framework for comprehensively recognising and benchmarking teaching and learning support roles within higher education.

The Framework has two main components, the Descriptors and the Dimensions in Practice.

This Framework Guidance Note answers the following questions:

- 2.1 What are the Descriptors?
- 2.2 Why are there four Descriptors?
- 2.3 How do they relate to each other?
- 2.4 How can you use the Descriptors?

2.1 What are the Descriptors?

These are a set of statements outlining the key characteristics of someone performing four broad categories of typical teaching and learning support roles within Higher Education.

Each Descriptor begins with a general statement addressed to the practitioner, which briefly indicates the level of understanding required for the performance of teaching and learning support role of that type at an appropriate standard within a higher education institution. This is followed by a series of between five and seven further statements which draw on the Dimensions of Practice to identify what someone performing such roles should be able to evidence.

For example, if you work in a role encompassed by Descriptor 2, you would be expected to be able to provide evidence of successful engagement across all five Areas of Activity and of appropriate knowledge and understanding across all aspects of Core Knowledge etc.

The general statements for Descriptors 1 to 3 are very similar; differing only in the depth and breadth of understanding required with some additional detailed differences in construction. They have a number of key features in common. Descriptor 4 is rather different in character and will be treated separately.

2.2 Why are there four Descriptors?

The Descriptors are intended to provide coverage of the full range of teaching and supporting learning roles within higher education. Since these roles are highly diverse it was necessary to create a number of descriptors to capture all of the kinds of roles that staff may be engaged in.

Descriptor 1 is intended to relate to staff whose role in teaching and/or supporting learning is focused on at least two, but not all, of the Areas of Activity. They would also be expected to possess the appropriate Core Knowledge and be committed to appropriate Professional Values. Perhaps also, they might undertake their role with the assistance of more experienced teachers or mentors. Each Descriptor is accompanied by suggestions for typical job roles covered by that descriptor. An example role for Descriptor 1 is an early career researcher with some teaching responsibility.

Descriptor 2 is intended to relate to staff with a more substantive teaching and supporting learning role(s) covering all of the Areas of Activity, Core Knowledge and Professional Values.

Descriptor 3 brings in a strong educational leadership (which may not necessarily be managerial) dimension, whilst Descriptor 4 is designed for highly experienced staff who have made a sustained and substantial impact at a strategic level in relation to teaching and learning support.

The Academy provides a **recognition** and **accreditation** service for each of these categories so a member of staff providing teaching and/or learning support can be recognised, depending on their role and experience as:

- Descriptor 1: An Associate of the Academy (AFHEA)
- Descriptor 2: A Fellow of the Academy (FHEA)
- Descriptor 3: A Senior Fellow of the Academy (SFHEA)
- Descriptor 4: A Principal Fellow of the Academy (PFHEA)

2.3 How do they relate to each other?

The Descriptors can be seen as both independent and hierarchical, depending on the individual and/or the context in which they work. For example: an academic may see their career path (expressed in terms of teaching professional development) as moving through the roles of Graduate Teaching Assistant (Descriptor 1) through a Lecturer post (Descriptor 2), as the main career grade, to an academic leadership role or middle management (Descriptor 3); and possibly to a more senior leadership role with demonstrable impact (Descriptor 4). In this case the Framework can be viewed hierarchically, as there is clear progression between the descriptors with descriptor 2, being subsumed within descriptor 3.

For other individuals, there may be no clear career pathway to progress their teaching or they are in a position in which they are likely to remain. This might be the case for learning technologists, physiotherapists engaged in workplace teaching, careers advisors, librarians and medical clinicians where career progression would not imply movement through the Descriptors. In this case the Framework is not viewed as hierarchical; the Descriptors provide the mechanism for recognising what the individual does and for their individual professional development, enabling them to focus on how they might develop different aspects of their teaching and supporting learning activity. An example might be a tutor who covers only some elements of teaching and learning and who might therefore align their work activities to

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Descriptor 1. They may however have opportunities to look beyond their immediate work and/or adapt to potential changes in their role, by working towards Descriptor 2.

It is therefore possible that individuals do not progress through all descriptors of the Framework and instead work within the Descriptor most relevant to the role they have.

In either case the Framework should be seen as developmental, where clear opportunities are provided for individuals to identify areas for development and engage with the Descriptor beyond that relevant to their current work and career stage.

2.4 How can you use the Descriptors?

The Framework (and particularly the descriptors) provides the means of articulating the individual's progress in terms of developing knowledge, expertise, impact, influence and leadership in teaching and supporting learning. They can be used to gain recognition as an Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow of Principal Fellow and also they can be used as the basis for professional reflection on the roles related to teaching or supporters of learning in a higher education institution.

Using Descriptor 1

This Descriptor is relevant to those who do not engage in the full spectrum of activities that might define academic or academic related practice, but who have a specific role in teaching and supporting HE learning. Such individuals, whatever their role or status, are not able to evidence engagement and expertise in all dimensions of the UKPSF. The descriptor is designed to be flexible and reflect the variety of different combinations of activities that HE teaching and learning may include. The typical role/career stage illustrations show that teaching and supporting learning at Standard Descriptor 1 is often not a 'formal' activity and can take the form of more informal, facilitative approaches.

Individuals need to demonstrate engagement with a minimum of two of the Areas of Activity. They should choose areas that are relevant to their work and/or which will develop their skills for future roles and activities. For example; a graduate teaching assistant may not be required to design or plan learning activities and/or programmes of study (AA1) nor to assess and give feedback to students (AA3) but may well be teaching in small seminar groups or in laboratory sessions (AA2) and will be responsible for ensuring that they provide their learners with appropriate resources and for following up tutorial sessions and other front-line teaching (AA4). It may also be the case that they are required to reflect upon the effectiveness of what they are doing, gather evaluative information on their teaching and to show how they are addressing the issues raised (AA5). Individuals should also demonstrate Core Knowledge (CK) relevant to the two Areas of Activity; in this example CK4 and CK5 are potentially the most relevant. If there are any other areas of Core Knowledge that are appropriate to their practice these could also be demonstrated and used as indicators of progress.

In addition to the Areas of Activity and the Core Knowledge an awareness and commitment to all the Professional Values should be evidenced. This might be integrated into the evidence presented for the Areas of Activity and Core Knowledge through providing a relevant rationale as to why particular approaches have been used (Professional Value 1), the principles (Professional Value 2) and relevant research/theory that underpins their practice (Professional Value 3). In addition to the selected Areas of Activity and Core Knowledge and the Professional Values, and in keeping with the particular characteristic

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of higher education, evidence of incorporating relevant subject and pedagogic research and/or scholarship within the activities chosen is expected.

Other examples of those working towards or at Descriptor 1 would be a clinician who supports students' learning in the clinical setting and who is involved in objective structural clinical examinations (OSCEs); a learning technologist with responsibilities for staff development who is engaged in designing and delivering workshops and online materials but who has no responsibility for assessment, or a librarian who similarly supports student learning, designs activities to develop students' library research capabilities, but who plays no role in assessment.

This Descriptor allows the user to interpret and apply the dimensions of the framework in a way that is meaningful to their practice whilst ensuring that the expectations of a restricted teaching and supporting learning role are addressed.

Using Descriptor 2

Descriptor 2 reflects main grade teaching responsibilities and is the expected descriptor for all staff who undertake substantive teaching as part of their role. The descriptor recognises and acknowledges good practice within the learning contexts of higher education, wherever this takes place, and however teaching and the support of learning is approached. Further, it recognises the diversity of staff who, in different ways, provide such teaching and support.

Individuals who are within descriptor 2 will be able to demonstrate achievement and success in all the dimensions of the framework including the areas of activity, core knowledge and professional values. As before, they are expected to incorporate relevant subject and pedagogic research and/or scholarship in their approaches. How this is evidenced will be dependent on the context in which the individual is working, nature of the subject, discipline or profession in which they teach, and the expectations of the institution in which the individual works.

Such individuals will be demonstrating engagement in continuing professional development activities with specific regard to learning and teaching and which result in the enhancement of their teaching. These activities are likely to be wide ranging, incorporating both formal and informal approaches to continuing professional development. Examples include: presenting or participating in conferences on teaching and learning (often discipline-specific), attending workshops or training events, engaging in peer observation or peer review of teaching, to the less formal activities that individuals are increasingly able to draw on and recognise as valuable contributions to their continuing professional development as a teacher. These might include regular departmental meetings where the discussion is about learning and teaching issues; 'corridor discussions' about teaching; bidding for and involvement in projects or research on teaching and learning; implementing new approaches; subject and other network activities, reading, and visits to other institutions/organisations etc.

Using Descriptor 3

Individuals working towards or attaining, Descriptor 3 will normally have a considerable level of expertise, developed over time, in supporting high quality student learning in all dimensions of the framework. They will have gained relevant experience through the use of a range of approaches including, mentoring, coordinating, supervising and managing individuals and groups. Individuals will evidence the depth and sophistication of their understanding and demonstrate a sustained and successful engagement with the

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UKPSF, indicating specifically how such knowledge, understanding and expertise is used in their approach to teaching, mentoring and their leadership roles.

Descriptor 3 recognises extended good practice both within the classroom (or learning environment) and in supporting the student learning experience in a wider context. This would normally include evidence of effective and significant impact on students, on colleagues and on the organisation/institution. Evidence of a wider sphere of influence than the classroom and the student group (the basic expectation for Descriptor 2), is required here. A relatively limited experience of programme and/or module management, for example, or in mentoring new staff, will not be sufficient.

Descriptor 3 incorporates all the requirements for Standard Descriptor 2 and can, therefore, be viewed as building on Descriptor 2. One way to view the difference is that Descriptor 2 is primarily concerned with all who teach and is a core expectation, whilst Descriptor 3 addresses experienced teachers and others who demonstrate leadership in their learning and teaching practices and related activities. The Descriptor requires evidence of wider impact, sustained success and influence. This would be the case with individuals who, for example, have developed and led substantial programmes of teaching and learning, led cross (and inter-) institutional teaching and learning focused projects, provided leadership for work in discipline based communities, or those who have led consultancy for major pieces of pedagogic work in subject associations and professional bodies.

An individual who has previously been recognised at Descriptor 2 might progress to Descriptor 3 on the basis that they have already demonstrated all areas of activity, core knowledge and professional values and that they need only evidence the elements of Descriptor 3 that are different to Descriptor 2 and which demonstrably make the case for Descriptor 3. It is, of course, possible for an individual who has not previously been recognised at Descriptor 2 to be recognised at Descriptor 3. This would normally be someone who has substantive professional experience, has evidence of CPD in pedagogy/teaching and learning and who leads major programmes and/or mentors colleagues etc and who can demonstrate their expertise, impact and influence. They could, for example, be a mid-career professional who is a highly experienced and effective teacher with substantive teaching responsibility.

There is a lack of common terminology which presents difficulties in the interpretation of the term 'mentoring'. In the context of the Framework 'mentoring' is seen as applicable to the context in which it takes place and would normally be understood to mean providing support, challenge and guidance to less experienced members of staff or colleagues in order to help them develop themselves and, in particular, the teaching and learning aspects of their professional practice. This may or may not take place within the formal umbrella of institutional mentoring schemes,

Using Descriptor 4

Descriptor 4 is distinctly different to Descriptors 1, 2 and 3. It is relevant to highly experienced teachers who are or have been widely respected for their effective teaching and who have progressed into senior roles. They will have substantial experience and knowledge of teaching and supporting learning and will be using this to make an impact at a senior level. The nature of their work may mean that they will not currently have any direct contact with students in teaching or supporting learning. Their work will normally include the effective strategic leadership of academic practice/development leading to the development and implementation of high quality student learning experiences.

The evidence used for Descriptor 4 will be dependent on the context in which the individual is working but in many respects is likely to be fundamentally different from the type of evidence required for Descriptor 3. The focus need not primarily be on an individual's teaching and learning practices but might focus on the contributions made, for example, to subject pedagogy, innovative approaches, and the evidence of effectiveness and impact at a strategic level. This evidence can draw on a broad range of experiences and activities and be underpinned by an understanding and commitment to the Core Knowledge and Professional Values.

One approach to demonstrating the Descriptor would be to present a synoptic narrative which evidences all aspects of the Descriptor. As the individual will not necessarily have immediate contact with learners they would need to draw on examples of their work which illustrate their understanding of the use and the value of the UKPSF. This might include how they have used the framework to shape and develop policy, strategy and schemes within their organisation. For example: a learning and teaching strategy underpinned by professional values; an institution wide peer review of a teaching scheme incorporating the UKPSF which is then further recognised in promotion structures; the development and implementation of innovative teaching and learning approaches within the organisation in response to the specific needs of their students.

At the heart of this Descriptor lies the demonstration of 'strategic impact and influence' in the context of one or more location, institution or organisation. Evidence will therefore need to draw on 'cycles' or 'levels' of influence including evidence drawn from institutional, national and/or international settings. The emphasis on 'a sustained and effective record of impact' means that it would be highly unusual for Descriptor 4 to be evidenced solely on the basis of completing a programme or course. However, completion of a relevant programme or course, (in leadership for example,) might constitute part of the evidence but would not alone be adequate for successful demonstration of the Descriptor.

Because Descriptor 3 and Descriptor 4 are distinctly different it is not necessary to resubmit evidence (with or without additions) for having attained Descriptor 3. However, evidence already provided for Descriptor 3 might be appropriately drawn on, to provide background and context for the developments used to evidence Descriptor 4. This would need to be accompanied by relevant additional evidence of the interpretation and application of the Dimensions for Descriptor 4 in current work.

The HEA has developed some Guidance Notes to support the effective use of the Framework; these will be extended and amended over time. If you would like to know more, please go to <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/professional-recognition> for further information. Alternatively you can contact the Professional Recognition team directly at recognition@heacademy.ac.uk or by calling 01904 717 500.