

Philosophy

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Preface

Subject benchmark statements provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area. They also represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have demonstrated.

This subject benchmark statement, together with others published concurrently, refers to the **bachelor's degree with honours**¹. In addition, some subject benchmark statements provide guidance on integrated master's awards.

Subject benchmark statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily, they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions (HEIs) when new programmes are being designed and developed in a subject area. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not a specification of a detailed curriculum in the subject.

Subject benchmark statements also provide support to HEIs in pursuit of internal quality assurance. They enable the learning outcomes specified for a particular programme to be reviewed and evaluated against agreed general expectations about standards. Subject benchmark statements allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design and can stimulate academic discussion and debate upon the content of new and existing programmes within an agreed overall framework. Their use in supporting programme design, delivery and review within HEIs is supportive of moves towards an emphasis on institutional responsibility for standards and quality.

Subject benchmark statements may also be of interest to prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a given subject or subject area.

The relationship between the standards set out in this document and those produced by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies for individual disciplines will be a matter for individual HEIs to consider in detail.

This subject benchmark statement represents a revised version of the original published in 2000. The review process was overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as part of a periodic review of all subject benchmark statements published in this year. The review and subsequent revision of the subject benchmark statement was undertaken by a group of subject specialists drawn from and acting on behalf of the subject community. The revised subject benchmark statement went through a full consultation with the wider academic community and stakeholder groups.

QAA publishes and distributes this subject benchmark statement and other subject benchmark statements developed by similar subject-specific groups.

¹ This is equivalent to the honours degree in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (level 10) and in the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (level 6).

The Disability Equality Duty (DED) came into force on 4 December 2006². The DED requires public authorities, including HEIs, to act proactively on disability equality issues. The Duty complements the individual rights focus of the *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA) and is aimed at improving public services and outcomes for disabled people as a whole. Responsibility for making sure that such duty is met lies with HEIs.

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) has published guidance³ to help HEIs prepare for the implementation of the Duty and provided illustrative examples on how to take the duty forward. HEIs are encouraged to read this guidance when considering their approach to engaging with components of the Academic Infrastructure⁴, of which subject benchmark statements are a part.

Additional information that may assist HEIs when engaging with subject benchmark statements can be found in the DRC revised *Code of Practice: Post-16 Education*⁵, and also through the Equality Challenge Unit⁶ which is established to promote equality and diversity in higher education.

² In England, Scotland and Wales

³ Copies of the guidance *Further and higher education institutions and the Disability Equality Duty*, guidance for principals, vice-chancellors, governing boards and senior managers working in further education colleges and HEIs in England, Scotland and Wales, may be obtained from the DRC at www.drc-gb.org/library/publications/disability_equality_duty/further_and_higher_education.aspx

⁴ An explanation of the Academic Infrastructure, and the roles of subject benchmark statements within it, is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure

⁵ Copies of the DRC revised *Code of Practice: Post-16 Education* may be obtained from the DRC at www.drc-gb.org/employers_and_service_provider/education/higher_education.aspx

⁶ Equality Challenge Unit, www.ecu.ac.uk

Foreword

This subject benchmark statement is a revised version of the original statement for philosophy published in 2000. The original statement was produced by a group of 15 philosophers, drawn from a wide variety of higher education (HE) providers and with a wide variety of philosophical interests, and representing all four countries of the United Kingdom (UK). This group was convened, at the request of QAA, by the National Committee for Philosophy after consultation with the profession at large.

The process of revision has been overseen by the Executive Committee of the British Philosophical Association - the successor organisation to the National Committee for Philosophy - in consultation with its members and with the QAA.

The revisions are all very minor and do not represent any change of view concerning the nature or characteristics of the philosophy component of bachelor's degree programmes, or concerning expectations about standards for the award of the bachelor's degree with honours for programmes involving philosophy. Any degree programme which met the standards of the previous subject benchmark statement will also meet the standards of the revised subject benchmark statement.

December 2006

1 Introduction

1.1 HE providers in the UK have traditionally included a philosophy department, or other unit, usually teaching its own single honours degrees. It is also fruitful to combine philosophy with other disciplines. A reflective understanding of the underlying presuppositions of any subject is immensely valuable. One striking feature of the teaching of philosophy at undergraduate level in the UK is the very wide range of honours degrees in which it may properly figure. A student may take one or more philosophy modules as an outside subject within a degree programme, whose title makes no reference to philosophy. In addition, there are combined studies degrees including a philosophy component, as well as joint honours programmes, whether equally balanced or major/minor. This subject benchmark statement takes into account the role that philosophy plays in combination with other subjects, as well as its function as a single honours degree. Degree programmes that involve less than 100 per cent philosophy, including joint honours programmes, are considered alongside philosophy single honours programmes.

2 Defining principles

2.1 The purpose of this section is to outline the framework for philosophy as a discipline within universities in the UK at the present time. The basic principles of this framework concern subject matter, method and aim of study.

2.2 Philosophy seeks to understand, and critically to question, ideas concerning the nature of reality, value and experience that play a pervasive role in understanding the world and ourselves. Problematic concepts, such as existence, reason and truth, occur in every sphere of human enquiry. Others belong to particular areas of thought and practice, such as art and politics.

2.3 Philosophy has been practised for thousands of years, and in many different cultures, giving rise to a diversity of traditions. Students of philosophy may be, and in single honours programmes usually are, introduced to works originally written in different languages, in different historical periods. This gives the subject great intellectual breadth.

2.4 The vitality of philosophy is enhanced by the existence of a plurality of approaches, and the maintenance and development of distinct (though overlapping) traditions.

2.5 Philosophy is open-ended, changing and extending its range both by its own internal dynamic and also by encompassing new problems generated from outside itself.

2.6 No one method suits all philosophical problems, but philosophy is characteristically done by such means as asking questions, trying out and critically engaging with ideas, making and sharpening distinctions, inventing new vocabularies, criticising and reinterpreting major texts, examining issues that arise in the history of philosophy, using the techniques of formal logic, constructing and assessing reasoned arguments, conducting thought experiments, or marshalling evidence from relevant sources.

2.7 Philosophy is not a rare specialism or 'minority subject', to be fostered in only a few centres. The central aim of philosophy is to understand the world and our place in it, and for this reason philosophy ought to be at the heart of the work of any university worthy of its name.

2.8 Philosophy is a part of the humanities, but its importance extends into many other areas of intellectual enquiry. Subjects such as the philosophy of physics and of biology are increasingly important. The philosophy of social science is relevant for social theory. The connection between logic and the development of computing is well known. Philosophers have shown themselves very ready in recent years to tackle practical issues, for example, in such areas as applied and professional ethics. Philosophy is both analytical and systematic, taking its own history seriously. Through international links of many kinds, the study of philosophy in the UK connects fruitfully with its study throughout the world.

2.9 The study of philosophy may make up any proportion of a degree programme, and the specific objectives of study properly vary accordingly, and may vary also depending upon what other subjects, if any, are in the student's programme. But the overall aim is to gain a deep understanding of some pervasive and problematic features of the world and of ourselves.

2.10 Philosophy nurtures a wide variety of skills. However, the skills that can be reasonably expected as the outcome of a full single honours degree can obviously not all be produced by one philosophy module on its own.

2.11 The heart of philosophy is a set of modes of thinking acquired through rigorous training. Of its nature, with its stress on independent thought, philosophy is an open-ended subject, constantly being revised and extended in the light of new insights and new problems. Yet its history, at least in the Western world, stretches back for 2,500 years. There is a balance to be drawn in a statement such as this between being excessively prescriptive about the content of a philosophy course and writing banal platitudes. The dilemma is encapsulated by the fact that great philosophers such as Socrates or Wittgenstein resisted the idea that philosophy is simply a body of knowledge to be taught. Yet at the same time it is surely usual for someone fully trained in philosophy to know something about some figures such as Socrates or Wittgenstein.

3 Nature and extent of philosophy

3.1 The following rough mapping of characteristic areas of study in philosophy can be given. It is not intended to be complete or final.

- General philosophy, comprising enquiry into ideas of the widest scope. Under this heading fall such topics as existence, truth, time, causality, free will, mind and body, God, knowledge, rationality, logic, meaning, duty, goodness, beauty, interpretation, gender and historicity.
- Philosophical study of particular areas of human practice and enquiry, such as language, science, social science, politics, law, education, religion, literature and the arts, mathematics, and applied ethics.

- The study of philosophy's own history, including the investigation of its diverse traditions. In the UK, the main focus of study is Western philosophy. This has its own canon in the study of the classics of Western philosophy from the Presocratics onwards, but the membership of this canon is not fixed. Philosophy can include study of texts and traditions from outside the Western world, such as Indian and Buddhist philosophy. It is characteristic of philosophy that it engages with past thought as living argument and as a challenge to contemporary modes of thinking.

3.2 There is a variety of philosophical traditions, each with its own style, approach, and characteristic concerns. However, there are a number of distinctive features common to the work of authors working within all these traditions, for example, the emphasis on precision and clarity of expression, and the degree of self-reflection.

4 Subject knowledge, understanding and skills

Philosophical knowledge and understanding

4.1 The range of philosophical material suited to study in an academic fashion is so wide that any student's studies must necessarily be highly selective. Students can acquire an appropriate grasp of philosophy from very different programmes of study.

4.2 A single honours programme typically includes, among other studies:

- the ideas and arguments of some of the major philosophers in the history of the subject, encountered in their own writings
- some central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind, broadly understood
- some central theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood
- awareness of some major issues currently at the frontiers of philosophical debate and research.

4.3 It is valuable when a single honours programme that is primarily in one particular philosophical tradition affords students some acquaintance with some other tradition or traditions. Students for whom contemporary analytic philosophy is a major part of their study should have the opportunity to study elementary logic.

4.4 Joint honours may include more or fewer of these elements, reflecting the overall aims of the degree programme. In addition, the content of more specialist programmes, for example those in the history and philosophy of science, will be shaped by their own distinctive aims. A student taking one or more philosophy modules would typically acquire philosophical knowledge and ability in at least one of the areas identified in above.

Student skills and personal attributes

4.5 Although the doctrines and techniques of philosophy may be usefully applied to practical questions - including notably those arising in ethics and political life - they are most distinctively employed in the discussion of problems of a fundamental and recognisably abstract nature. Tackling such problems demands a range of philosophical skills.

4.6 All philosophy graduates should acquire a measure of the skills required by the discipline, though the range of skills demonstrated and the degree of competence exhibited will vary depending on whether students take single honours, joint honours, or philosophy units within a modular honours degree.

4.7 Although some skills are specific to particular modules, others are pervasive through the discipline. It would therefore be inappropriate for each philosophy degree programme, let alone each module, to have to demonstrate how each skill is separately acquired.

4.8 Graduates will be expected to have acquired the intellectual abilities and attributes listed below, most of which are readily transferable to other contexts.

General philosophical skills

- Articulacy in identifying underlying issues in a wide variety of debates.
- Precision of thought and expression in the analysis and formulation of complex and controversial problems.
- Sensitivity in interpretation of texts drawn from a variety of ages and/or traditions.
- Clarity and rigour in the critical assessment of arguments presented in such texts.
- The ability to use and criticise specialised philosophical terminology.
- The ability to abstract and analyse arguments, and to identify flaws in them, such as false premises and invalid reasoning.
- The ability to construct rationally persuasive arguments for or against specific philosophical claims.
- The ability to move between generalisation and appropriately detailed discussion, inventing or discovering examples to support or challenge a position, and distinguishing relevant and irrelevant considerations.
- The ability to consider unfamiliar ideas and ways of thinking, and to examine critically pre-suppositions and methods within the discipline itself.

Engaging in philosophical debate

- The ability to conduct arguments about matters of the highest moment without recourse to insult or susceptibility to take offence.
- Willingness to evaluate opposing arguments, to formulate and consider the best arguments for different views and to identify the weakest elements of the most persuasive view.
- Honesty in recognising the force of the conclusions warranted by a careful assessment of pertinent arguments.

Breadth of view

- The ability to cross traditional subject boundaries, examining the limitations and virtues of other disciplines and practices, and recognising philosophical doctrines in unfamiliar places.
- The ability to apply philosophical skills and techniques to issues arising outside the academy, including practical reasoning.

Generic skills

- The ability to listen attentively to complex presentations.
- The ability to read carefully a variety of technical and non-technical material.
- The ability to use libraries effectively.
- The ability to reflect clearly and critically on oral and written sources, employing powers of imagination as well as analysis.
- The ability to remember relevant material and bring it to mind when the moment of its relevance arises.
- The ability to marshal a complex body of information.
- The ability to construct cogent arguments in the evaluation of this material.
- The ability to present, in both oral and written forms, a clear and well-structured assessment of relevant considerations.

4.9 Students should have the opportunity, through institutional provision, to develop skills in the following areas:

- information technology: word-processing, email and the internet
- information search and retrieval, using online resources and electronic databases to access bibliographic material.

4.10 The study of philosophy fosters the development of a range of personal attributes that are important in the world of work that will strengthen the graduate's ability to engage in lifelong learning, and that will contribute to the wider community. These will include:

- the ability to motivate oneself
- the ability to work autonomously
- the general management of one's own work to time limits
- a flexible and adaptable mind able to face new situations, and
- the ability to think creatively, self-critically and independently.

5 Teaching, learning and assessment

5.1 Successful forms of teaching and learning may vary widely, including:

- lectures
- tutorials
- seminars, including those in which students are responsible in turn for introducing topics
- courses of guided reading coupled with submission of essays for discussion with a tutor
- the writing of a substantial dissertation, under a greater or lesser degree of supervision
- email discussion groups
- other student-led discussion groups.

5.2 Provision for students of the Open University, or in other distance learning programmes, will of course employ yet other modes of teaching and student learning.

5.3 Two general principles should govern the shape of any provision, whether it is a single module that can be taken as an outside subject or a whole single honours programme, or anything in between. How these principles apply will of course vary from case to case, and in particular they will apply differently to Open University and distance learning programmes.

Learning in philosophy has to be an active process

5.4 Given the nature of philosophy the provision in any module should include a substantial element of learning through:

- the student's own thoughtful reading, starting from an appropriate reading list
- discussion, whether in tutorials, seminars, or in some other format, including live presentations by students, and
- considered presentation in writing by students of their understanding and critical appraisal of material they have studied, with provision of feedback on what they have written.

5.5 In the case of formal logic, students need equally to learn by doing, though the form of activity will obviously be different, principally involving the tackling of suitably varied tutorial exercises graded in order of difficulty, with provision of appropriate feedback on their efforts. Formal logic is an area in which computer assisted learning can very naturally be employed, and there is a range of programmes available for this purpose.

Learning in philosophy should be progressive

5.6 The philosophical component of any honours programme of more than a minimum size should overall be ordered:

- to allow students to progress incrementally in the development of their philosophical understanding and capacities
- in a progression from study with a greater degree of support and assistance to more independent and self-directed study.

5.7 It is recognised that many departments teach a variety of subjects in a two-year cycle in order to allow greater breadth of provision in the two final years. In such programmes there will be a progression in difficulty from the first year of study to the two final years.

5.8 Assessment in philosophy aims to test both:

- knowledge and understanding of a corpus of material
- the ability to reason rigorously, critically, creatively and autonomously.

5.9 Various methods and combinations of methods can be used for this purpose, the principal ones being:

- formal examinations, whether seen, unseen or open-book
- assessed essays
- portfolios of coursework
- dissertations
- formal assessment of performance in live presentations and debates, ranging from seminar presentations to formal viva voce examinations.

5.10 Once again, very different overall patterns of assessment may be equally effective in measuring performance. Whatever pattern is adopted, departments need to assure themselves that it embodies safeguards against plagiarism.

6 Benchmark standards and levels of achievement

6.1 The standards of student achievement reflect the knowledge and understanding of philosophy and its various techniques and methods, together with a profile of skills, which students should attain.

6.2 The subject benchmark statement documents these standards in the broadest of terms, recognising the variety of programme content and the different emphases that may legitimately be placed on specific elements of the skills profile. It is not intended to stifle experimentation and innovation in the development of new programmes or the introduction of novel methods of assessment.

6.3 Not everything that is valuable can be separately tested, measured or quantified. It should not be assumed that all of the skills specified as learning outcomes are examined in a manner which contributes directly to the summative assessment. It is widely recognised, for example, that one of the distinctive benefits of HE is the

development of qualities of personal organisation and time management which follow from the attribution to students of considerable responsibility in directing their own learning. Independence and self-motivation can be fostered but not taught in academic departments. The depth or extent of such personal qualities cannot be directly examined, though successful acquisition of them is expected to show through in the application of other skills - which are explicitly assessed. Difficulties such as these should not inhibit attempts to inculcate or formatively assess such skills as part of a degree programme.

6.4 The paragraphs below describe two levels of achievement: threshold and typical. These may be defined as:

- threshold: the threshold level of achievement marks the minimally acceptable repertoire of an honours graduate in philosophy
- typical: a typical level of achievement marks work of the standard attained by the majority of honours graduates.

The list of standards is especially appropriate for single honours students taking a wide range of modules inducing a variety of skills which reinforce each other. The standards, as described, permit examiners to distinguish different degrees of accomplishment.

6.5 The best philosophy graduates achieve excellence beyond the typical standard. Such students may demonstrate, for example, acuity and sensitivity in the interpretation of texts and wide reading beyond the standard course material. They may show an ability to apply it constructively with unusual analytical ability and rigour and a marked independence of thought.

Illustration of threshold and typical levels of attainment in philosophy

6.6 Any statement of levels of attainment should be read in the light of 6.3 above; not everything that is valuable can be separately tested, measured or quantified.

6.7 Students take philosophy classes in single and joint honours degree programmes and as units in modular degrees with other subject components. The descriptions given below of threshold and typical levels are intended to apply to single honours programmes. The range of knowledge expected and the scope and measure of skills achieved by students studying philosophy in lower proportions will vary correspondingly. Students completing any philosophical module should be expected to have competence in some general philosophical skills, and have knowledge of texts and topics identified in the description of the module. No single module can achieve everything.

Threshold level of attainment

Knowledge and understanding

6.8 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show to some extent most of the following:

- familiarity with the writings of some of the major philosophers
- familiarity with some central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind, broadly understood

- familiarity with some central theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood
- some appreciation of the wide range of techniques of philosophical reasoning.

General philosophical skills

6.9 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show to some extent most of the following:

- an ability to identify underlying issues in various debates
- grasp of some philosophical problems, mentioning arguments for or against proposed solutions
- understanding of the importance of careful interpretation of a variety of texts
- views on the success of standard arguments
- familiarity with the use of specialised philosophical terminology
- awareness of the nature of sound arguments and logical fallacies
- appreciation of how generalisations can be supported or weakened by detailed discussion
- recognition of arguments on both sides of a philosophical question.

6.10 In general, work at the threshold level of attainment shows weak understanding of the material and contains elementary errors.

Typical level of attainment

Knowledge and understanding

6.11 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show to an adequate degree most of the following:

- knowledge of the theories and arguments of some of the major philosophers, encountered in their own writings, and some awareness of important areas of interpretative controversy concerning the major philosophers
- alertness to opportunities for employing historical doctrines to illuminate contemporary debates
- a clear grasp of some central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind, broadly understood
- a clear grasp of some central theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood
- an awareness of major issues currently at the frontiers of philosophical debate and research
- appreciation of the wide range of application of techniques of philosophical reasoning.

General philosophical skills

6.12 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show to an adequate degree most of the following:

- the ability to identify the underlying issues in different kinds of debate
- the ability to analyse the structure of complex and controversial problems, with an understanding of major strategies of reasoning designed to resolve such problems
- the ability to read carefully and interpret texts drawn from a variety of ages and/or traditions with a sensitivity to context
- the ability to judge the success of standard arguments
- the ability to identify textually-based arguments and subject their structure and implications to rigorous assessment
- the ability to use and understand properly specialised philosophical terminology
- the ability to abstract, analyse and construct logical argument, employing the techniques of formal and informal methods of reasoning as appropriate, together with an ability to recognise any relevant fallacies
- the ability to identify common persuasive stratagems that cannot withstand philosophical scrutiny and demonstrate how they weaken the arguments that employ them
- the ability to employ detailed argument to support or criticise generalisations in the light of specific implications
- readiness to review unfamiliar ideas with an open mind and a willingness to change one's mind when appropriate.

Engaging in philosophical debate

6.13 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show to an adequate degree most of the following:

- the ability to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of arguments on both sides of a philosophical question
- readiness to assess arguments carefully and scrupulously, drawing only warranted conclusions.

Breadth of view

6.14 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show to an adequate degree most of the following:

- readiness to cross traditional subject boundaries, so as to examine the limitations and virtues of other disciplines and practices, and ability to identify philosophical doctrines outside the academy
- readiness to engage with the concerns of ordinary life, examining characteristic problems of practical reason (eg the subjects of ethical and political debate) while being sensitive to a variety of opinions, practices and ways of life.

Appendix A - Membership of the review group for the subject benchmark statement for philosophy

Professor David Archard	Lancaster University
Professor Robin Attfield	Cardiff University
Professor Helen Beebee (Chair)	University of Birmingham
Professor Stephen Clark	University of Liverpool
Professor John Dupré	University of Exeter
Dr Gordon Finlayson	University of Sussex
Professor Brad Hooker	University of Reading
Professor Don Hutto	University of Hertfordshire
Professor Dudley Knowles	University of Glasgow
Professor M McCabe	King's College London
Tony McWalter	former Member of Parliament
Professor Adrian Moore	University of Oxford
Professor Onora O'Neill	University of Cambridge
Dr Duncan Pritchard	University of Stirling
Professor Tom Sorell	University of Essex
Professor Jonathan Wolff	University College, London

Appendix B - Membership of the original benchmarking group for philosophy

Details below appear as published in the original subject benchmark statement for philosophy (2000).

Dr JEJ Altham	University of Cambridge
Professor AS Bowie	Anglia Polytechnic University
Professor JR Cameron	University of Aberdeen
Professor R Chadwick	University of Central Lancashire
Professor SRL Clark	University of Liverpool
Professor JDG Evans	Queen's University of Belfast
Dr B Hooker	University of Reading
Dr R Hursthouse	Open University
DR Knowles	University of Glasgow
Dr I Lloyd	University of Wales, Swansea
Professor R Monk	University of Southampton
Professor J Ree	Middlesex University
Professor T Sorell	University of Essex
Professor RH Trigg (Chair)	University of Warwick
J Wolff	University College London, University of London
Dr D Horton (Secretary)	University of Warwick

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