



QAA

English

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Fax 01623 450481

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Contents

Preface	ii
Foreword	iv
Defining principles	1
The nature and scope of English	2
Subject knowledge and skills	3
Teaching, learning and assessment	6
Benchmark standards	8
Appendix A - Membership of the review group for the subject benchmark statement for English	10
Appendix B - Membership of the original benchmarking group for English	11

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

The original subject benchmark statement, published in 2000, foresaw the need for periodic revision. Since the original subject benchmark statement was warmly welcomed by the subject community, this relatively minor revision retains the spirit and most of the wording of the original subject benchmark statement. We have, however, identified a development in the nature of the discipline which needs to be addressed. The striking increase in the number of programmes involving elements of creative, imaginative and transformative writing requires acknowledgement. The subject benchmark statement in 2000 made minor references to this domain, but its recommendations remained largely implicit. Overall, this draft revision seeks to recognise and build on the vigour of the reconfigured subject, taking account of new contents and developments in teaching, learning and assessment. This document endeavours to cater for students who will acquire the same skills and aptitudes for employment and lifelong learning through cognate and overlapping disciplinary practices.

This revision was carried out within the QAA framework by a small group representing the Council for College and University English and advised by the Higher Education Academy English Subject Centre. The group held two face-to-face meetings, and carried on substantial email correspondence. We wish to acknowledge the value to the extended English academic community of the pioneering work of the original benchmarking group, and its chair, Professor Judy Simons, and to conclude by endorsing the words of the original prefatory letter:

We see the primary task of the subject benchmark statement not as to specify a regulatory framework nor to restrict what is or will be taught but to articulate principles that can provide a framework for undergraduate degree programmes in English. We recognise that diversity of practice is vital for the growth of the subject and the equally important development of its students' potential.

December 2006

1 Defining principles

1.1 English is a versatile academic discipline characterised by the rigorous and critical study of literature and language. It is concerned with the production, reception and interpretation of written texts, both literary and non-literary; and with the nature, history and potential of the English language. The study of English develops a flexible and responsive openness of mind, conceptual sophistication in argument, and the ability to engage in dialogue with past and present cultures and values. The subject also has a special role in sustaining in the general community a constantly renewed knowledge and critical appreciation of the literature of the past and of other cultural forms.

1.2 Methods of critical reading and writing taught on English courses take account of the form, structure and rhetoric of texts, their social provenance, the cultures of which they are a part and in which they intervene, and their treatment of ideas and material shared with other subject areas. Students study the interrelationships between literary texts, and they may also consider the relationships between literature, other media and other forms of artistic and cultural production. Some students may attain appropriate elements of this understanding (together with practice-specific skills) through creative writing. The study of the English language embraces diverse modes of communication, oral, written and mixed, and their distinctive levels of phonology, grammar, lexis, semantics and pragmatics. All English graduates are expected to be aware of the shaping influence upon meaning of historical, social, political, stylistic, ethnic, gender, geographical and other contexts.

1.3 An undergraduate education in English and cognate subjects should:

- foster wide and varied reading
- enable students to develop independent critical thinking and judgement
- engage students imaginatively in the process of reading, analysing and/or producing complex and sophisticated literary and non-literary texts and discourses
- offer a broad and balanced curriculum
- help students to understand, appreciate and employ the expressive resources of language
- problematise the acts of reading and writing so that students can reflect critically upon textual production and reception both in history and in their own practice
- offer students a knowledge and appreciation of contextual approaches to the production and reception of literary and non-literary texts and discourses
- promote the understanding and practice of verbal creativity and the formal and aesthetic dimensions of literary texts
- develop a range of subject-specific and transferable skills, including high-order conceptual, analytic, and communication skills of value in graduate employment
- provide an intellectually stimulating and satisfying experience of learning and studying, within the distinctive framework of English
- encourage a sense of enthusiasm for the subject and an appreciation of its continuing social and cultural importance
- provide a basis for further study in English or related disciplines and for teachers of English at all levels.

1.4 The discipline of English in higher education (HE) is characterised by diverse educational approaches and intellectual emphases. A meaningful subject benchmark statement for the subject recognises both the intrinsic richness of the subject as practised and seeks to create the opportunity for continuing health and growth. The primary task of the subject benchmark statement therefore is not to specify a regulatory framework nor to prescribe, but to articulate principles which can provide the foundation for undergraduate degree programmes in English, and which can accommodate and encourage new developments.

2 The nature and scope of English

2.1 In its intellectual character and academic practice, HE English is a continually evolving discipline. It demonstrates a critical self-awareness that encourages a sophisticated interrogation of its own history, status and practices. It includes the study of the literatures from the Anglophone world. In addition to the study of literature and language, the subject can also incorporate comparative literature and literature in translation, drama, creative writing, film, and the study of non-literary texts.

2.2 The breadth of English means that any attempts at prescription should be avoided. It is recognised, for example, that some degree programmes will offer a balance of English language and literature; some will be predominantly or exclusively literature based; others will be predominantly language based. Still others will have a strong component of cultural history or the study of non-literary media such as film. There is also likely to be in many degree programmes some measure of specialisation beyond the initial stages. Nonetheless, it is accepted that there are common areas of knowledge and skills, and that students should be able to situate any chosen specialisms within a wider understanding of the discipline concerned.

2.3 The marked increase in the number of creative writing courses, strands, and modules since the original subject benchmark statement was published provides an excellent example of the vitality of English and its related disciplines. This revision recognises both the fertility of creative writing and its close and productive affinity with the study of English literature and language. Creative writing, in addition to encouraging self-critical practice, allows students to acquire many of the same aptitudes, knowledge and skills, but attain them to some extent through different routes. Creative writing is one form (among others) of disciplined engagement with verbal culture. Its tangible outcomes may take the form of the production of original works of imagination in prose, verse, or dramatic form, or may take the form of creative rewriting, or adaptation of existing texts. The original work produced by creative writing students is likely to be informed by wide and critical reading of existing literature, and to demonstrate precise attention to genre, form and audience. While individual modules may be dedicated to particular genres, where there is a coherent strand of modules (for example in a single, joint or combined honours programme) students should normally have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with, and practise in, a variety of genres and styles.

2.4 The responsive nature of the discipline, its intellectual range and diversity of approach open it up to the knowledge and procedures of other subjects. English encourages inter and multidisciplinary perspectives. Multidisciplinary work consists of the

study of two or more subjects in parallel which may have little or no formal relationship. Interdisciplinary study seeks a more active integration between subject areas through, for example, the pursuit of a theme from different perspectives (eg the representation of gender), or the joint study of a particular topic, period or area (eg renaissance studies), or in the joint study of cognate disciplines with the provision of bridging courses (eg English and philosophy).

2.5 In round figures, single honours English programmes accept about 8,500 students each year. Approximately the same number again read English as part of combined honours or joint honours programmes, and English is a central subject in most modular schemes in the humanities. The intellectual sympathy between English and other disciplines is reflected in this student constituency. Combined and joint honours students are rarely taught or assessed separately from their peers in single honours at the level of the course or module. This subject benchmark statement therefore applies to all students taking a significant proportion of English courses as part of their degree programme.

2.6 English has a vital role to play in promoting the ideal of lifelong learning. Since its inception as a subject of study, English has had and continues to have a strong appeal among mature students in mainstream HE. It is also widely taught in short courses and continuing education programmes. The confidence and self-esteem that an advanced level of literacy imparts have made English a popular and empowering subject among mature students and other non-traditional entrants in HE.

3 Subject knowledge and skills

Subject knowledge

3.1 English incorporates different types of degree programmes with distinctive configurations. While the emphasis given to particular aspects of subject knowledge will vary from institution to institution and from programme to programme, graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree should, as appropriate, be able to demonstrate:

- knowledge of literature and language, which in the case of literature should include a substantial number of authors and texts from different periods of literary history. For single honours literature students this should include knowledge of writing from periods before 1800; for single honours language students this should include a broad knowledge of the history and development of the English language
- knowledge and understanding of the distinctive character of texts written in the principal literary genres, fiction, poetry and drama, and of other kinds of writing and communication
- experience of the range of literatures in English and of regional and global varieties of the English language
- knowledge of the structure, levels and discourse functions of the English language
- appreciation of the power of imagination in literary creation
- awareness of the role of critical traditions in shaping literary history

- knowledge of linguistic, literary, cultural and socio-historical contexts in which literature is written and read
- knowledge of the relationship between literature and other media including, where appropriate, film, or other forms of cultural production
- knowledge of useful and precise critical terminology and, where appropriate, linguistic and stylistic terminology
- awareness of the range and variety of approaches to literary study, which may include creative practice, performance, and extensive specialisation in critical and/or linguistic theory
- awareness of how literature and language produce and reflect cultural change and difference
- recognition of the multi-faceted nature of the discipline, and of its complex relationship to other disciplines and forms of knowledge.

Subject-specific skills

3.2 Graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree will have acquired a range of complementary literary, linguistic and critical skills. Individual degree programmes will choose to place the emphasis on developing particular abilities and skills. The following subject-specific skills are intended to provide a broad framework for articulating the outcomes of individual programmes:

- critical skills in the close reading, description, analysis, or production of texts or discourses
- ability to articulate knowledge and understanding of texts, concepts and theories relating to English studies
- sensitivity to generic conventions and to the shaping effects upon communication of circumstances, authorship, textual production and intended audience
- responsiveness to the central role of language in the creation of meaning and a sensitivity to the affective power of language
- rhetorical skills of effective communication and argument, both oral and written
- command of a broad range of vocabulary and an appropriate critical terminology
- bibliographic skills appropriate to the discipline, including accurate citation of sources and consistent use of conventions in the presentation of scholarly work
- awareness of how different social and cultural contexts affect the nature of language and meaning
- understanding of how cultural norms and assumptions influence questions of judgement
- comprehension of the complex nature of literary languages, and an awareness of the relevant research by which they may be better understood.

Generic and graduate skills

3.3 English graduates will be able to relate specific analyses to a general picture and understand particular issues in their widest application. The key transferable and cognitive skills which English graduates should possess, and which make them attractive to employers, are:

- advanced literacy and communication skills and the ability to apply these in appropriate contexts, including the ability to present sustained and persuasive written and oral arguments cogently and coherently
- the capacity to analyse and critically examine diverse forms of discourse
- ability to engage in processes of drafting and redrafting texts to achieve clarity of expression and an appropriate style
- the capacity to adapt and transfer the critical methods of the discipline to a variety of working environments
- the ability to acquire substantial quantities of complex information of diverse kinds in a structured and systematic way involving the use of the distinctive interpretative skills of the subject
- competence in the planning and execution of essays, presentations, and other writing and project work
- the capacity for independent thought and judgement demonstrated through critical or creative practice
- skills in critical reasoning and analysis
- the ability to comprehend and develop intricate concepts in an open-ended way which involves an understanding of purpose and consequences
- the ability to work with and in relation to others through the presentation of ideas and information and the collective negotiation of solutions
- the ability to understand, interrogate and apply a variety of theoretical positions and weigh the importance of alternative perspectives
- the ability to handle information and argument in a critical and self-reflective manner
- research skills, including the ability to gather, sift and organise material independently and critically, and evaluate its significance
- information technology (IT) skills broadly understood and the ability to access, work with and evaluate electronic resources (such as hypertext, conferencing, e-publishing, blogs and wikis)
- time management and organisational skills, as shown by the ability to plan and present conclusions effectively.

4 Teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching and learning

4.1 Programmes in English should articulate principles of coherent and progressive development across the curricular provision and the learning experience of students. It is important that at the outset, students are fully informed of the particular emphases and strengths of their programmes of study, and that assessment criteria be explicitly linked to programme outcomes.

4.2 There are many appropriate formats in which English may be taught. These include the lecture, seminar, workshop, tutorial, personal supervision, and various modes of directed but largely independent study. Some work makes use of printed resource packs, audiovisual materials, corpora, and a range of electronic media, including information and communications technology (ICT) and the internet, but all English courses are underpinned by access to written texts - both primary and secondary - in conventional printed form. English and cognate subjects lend themselves to adventurous use of virtual learning environments. In different aspects of their work, students develop skills of information search, comprehension and analysis, problem solving, and the generation of original texts. It follows therefore that assessment modes should be designed to develop as well as to measure the accurate, clear, effective and sustained communication of ideas and subject knowledge.

4.3 The interaction between the independent study of these materials and the communication and discussion of ideas is fundamental to the teaching of English. Teaching arrangements in English programmes should provide a balance of direct instruction (or other form of provision of information) and the opportunity for active assimilation, questioning and debate. The focused discussion of writing lies at the heart of learning in the subject. It is important that students are able to engage in dialogue, and develop and negotiate conclusions with others, which is a key component in the acquisition of both subject-specific and transferable skills.

4.4 In order to develop and demonstrate the skills identified above, to engage in informed written debate and to present ideas in a sustained discursive form, English students should be required to engage in informed written analysis and to present ideas in a sustained discursive form.

4.5 Many English programmes operate within the 'unitised' formats of modular schemes of various kinds in which each unit specifies explicit and defined objectives. Whatever the overall structure, the relationship between the individual elements, and objectives of the course as a whole, should be coherent and explicit.

Assessment

4.6 The assessment of students should be explicitly linked to the learning processes and outcomes of their degree programmes, which should recognise that assessment significantly influences how and what students learn. Assessment inheres in and informs the learning process: it is formative and diagnostic as well as summative and evaluative, and the process should provide students with constructive feedback. Students should be given the opportunity to pursue original thought and ideas, and encouraged to question received opinion. Assessment criteria should be specified in relation to the programme, unit or module as appropriate, and specific variations, for example, in relation to oral assessment or work-related reports, should be made explicit.

4.7 The diversity of material and approaches, as well as programme objectives which value choice and independence of mind, suggest that it is desirable for students of English to experience a variety of assessment forms. Programmes should specify and make explicit the overall rationale for their approach to assessment, make clear the relationship between diagnostic and final assessment, and ensure, within the variety of approaches taken, that assessment is consistent in the demands it makes on students and the standards of judgement it applies.

4.8 English and cognate subjects lend themselves to the use of varied forms of assessment. In addition to the essay, other forms of assessment might include:

- formal unseen examinations of various kinds and durations
- 'take-away' examinations
- coursework (including short and long essay requirements and reviews)
- project work (which might be collaborative)
- dissertations (which might require evidence of considerable scholarly research)
- oral assessment (including formal presentations, the management of meetings, assessment of seminar performance etc)
- external placement or work-based learning reports
- tasks aimed at the development of specific skills (including ICT and bibliographical exercises)
- portfolios of creative, critical, or textually transformative writing, which might include reflective journals, essay plans, annotated bibliographies, and created resources, including electronic materials.

4.9 Overall, assessment in English will reward achievement in the following areas at distinguishable levels (see section 5):

- breadth and depth of subject knowledge (including relevant contextual knowledge) and the demonstration of powers of textual analysis, and/or an informed ability to evaluate and reflect upon linguistic and stylistic choices
- the management of discursive analysis and argument, including the awareness of alternative or contextualising lines of argument
- rhetorical strategies which demonstrate the convincing deployment and evaluation of evidence
- fluent and effective communication of ideas, and sophisticated writing skills
- independence of mind and originality of approach in interpretative and written practice
- critical acumen
- informed engagement with scholarly debates.

5 Benchmark standards

Threshold standard

- 5.1 This is the minimum requirement that should be reached by honours graduates.
- 5.2 Graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree will be able to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject as defined by the breadth of the curriculum indicated in section 3 above.
- 5.3 Their knowledge will include awareness of the different ideas and values represented in and through literature and language and of how different critical and creative approaches to them are themselves productive of knowledge.
- 5.4 Graduates in English will be able to demonstrate powers of textual analysis and critical argument and will display competence in written English, and in oral expression. They will show an awareness of the affective power of language, and a self-critical approach to their own writing.
- 5.5 They will be able to consider views other than their own and exercise a degree of independent critical judgement in the close reading of texts.
- 5.6 They will be able to conduct research through self-formulated questions and tasks, supported by the gathering of relevant information and organised lines of enquiry, resulting in a sustained piece or pieces of work.

Typical standard

- 5.7 This is the level of attainment reached by the typical student whose results fall into the main cluster.
- 5.8 Typical honours graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree will be able to demonstrate a wide knowledge of the subject as defined by the breadth of the curriculum indicated in section 3 above and an ability to deploy a conceptual grasp of its central concerns.
- 5.9 Their knowledge will incorporate the ability to interpret different ideas and values represented in and through language and literature. They will be able to recognise and articulate the ways in which these different approaches generate knowledge.
- 5.10 They will be able to demonstrate confident analytic skills together with powers of textual analysis and fluent critical argument. They will have developed an effective command of written English together with a wide-ranging and accurate vocabulary.
- 5.11 They will show an informed awareness of historical and cultural differences and of the affective power of language to shape meaning.
- 5.12 They will be able to engage in critical debate with views other than their own, show independence of thought, and exercise a degree of critical judgement of their own and others' work.
- 5.13 They will be able to read and/or produce texts with care and precision, paying attention to the importance of verbal detail, structure and form, and of the role of the reader in the process of communication and interpretation.

5.14 They will be able to conduct research through self-formulated tasks and questions, supported by the gathering of relevant information and materials and organised lines of enquiry resulting in a piece or pieces of work of sustained imaginative and/or argumentative and analytic power.

5.15 They will achieve scholarly standards of presentation and of writing accurately, clearly and effectively.

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

Professor Elisabeth Jay	Oxford Brookes University
Professor Ben Knights	The Higher Education Academy English Subject Centre
Professor Greg Walker (Chair)	University of Leicester
Professor Sue Zlosnik	The Manchester Metropolitan University

Appendix B - Membership of the original benchmarking group for English

Details provided below are as published in the original subject benchmark statement for English (2000).

Dr L R Anderson	University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Professor J Beer	The Manchester Metropolitan University
Dr M J Coyle	University of Wales, Cardiff
Professor K Everest	University of Liverpool
Professor K Fullbrook	University of the West of England
Dr V Gillespie	St Anne's College, Oxford
Professor P Hamilton	Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London
Professor N H Keeble	University of Stirling
Professor P W Martin	Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education
Professor P Parrinder	University of Reading
Dr S Regan	Open University
Professor R Rylance	Anglia Polytechnic University
Professor J A Simons (Chair)	De Montfort University
Professor K Wales	University of Leeds
Professor R J Webster	Liverpool John Moores University

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

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