

English

Subject benchmark statements

Subject benchmark statements provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject. They also represent general expectations about the standards for the award of qualifications at a given level and articulate the attributes and capabilities that those possessing such qualifications should be able to demonstrate.

This subject benchmark statement, together with the others published concurrently, refers to the ***bachelors degree with honours***.

Subject benchmark statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily, they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions 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. Benchmark statements provide for variety and flexibility in the design of programmes and encourage innovation within an agreed overall framework.

Subject benchmark statements also provide support to institutions 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.

Finally, subject benchmark statements are one of a number of external sources of information that are drawn upon for the purposes of academic review* and for making judgements about threshold standards being met. Reviewers do not use subject benchmark statements as a crude checklist for these purposes however. Rather, they are used in conjunction with the relevant programme specifications, the institution's own internal evaluation documentation, together with primary data in order to enable reviewers to come to a rounded judgement based on a broad range of evidence.

The benchmarking of academic standards for this subject area has been undertaken by a group of subject specialists drawn from and acting on behalf of the subject community. The group's work was facilitated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, which publishes and distributes this statement and other benchmarking statements developed by similar subject-specific groups.

The statement represents the first attempt to make explicit the general academic characteristics and standards of an honours degree in this subject area, in the UK.

In due course, but not before July 2003, the statement will be revised to reflect developments in the subject and the experiences of institutions and academic reviewers who are working with it. The Agency will initiate revision and, in collaboration with the subject community, will establish a group to consider and make any necessary modifications to the statement.

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* academic review in this context refers to the Agency's new arrangements for external assurance of quality and standards. Further information regarding these may be found in the ***Handbook for Academic Review***, which can be found on the Agency's web site.

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Letter from the Chair of the benchmarking group

The benchmarking statement for English has been produced in full consultation with the subject community. The composition of the benchmarking group itself broadly reflects the nature of the HE academic community in English. Its fifteen members are drawn from nine 'old' universities, five 'new' universities and one college of Higher Education. The group also has wide regional and subject representation, and includes members who have expertise in multi-disciplinary provision, modular and combined programmes, and open learning.

The group has held eight meetings, including an initial briefing meeting, an editorial meeting and a consultation meeting with the subject community. In addition preliminary versions of the benchmarking statement were sent at various stages of its composition for comment to nine focus groups: three undergraduate departments of English; three student groups (including recent graduates), a careers advisory service, the English team at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, and a focus group nominated by the DFEE. In late November 1999 the draft statement was circulated to all UK departments of English and relevant subject associations, inviting them to a consultative meeting on 4 December and/or to submit written responses. The meeting, held under the auspices of the Council for College and University English, the HE subject association, was attended by 110 delegates, representing 75 institutions. The draft benchmarking statement has taken full account of all responses received to date, including both written and oral responses following that meeting.

The English benchmarking group has been conscious throughout of the problematic nature of the task it has been required to undertake. English is a highly popular subject in combined and modular programmes of study, and we are aware that modularity has been the subject of discussions by a separate parallel benchmarking group. The English benchmarking statement makes reference to combined and other programmes, although it is primarily intended to apply to single and joint Honours routes, both modular and non-modular. At the same time we suggest that the specifications for learning outcomes in modules in language and literature, which might normally be found in named English degree routes, might benefit from guidelines in this benchmarking statement.

We have also been sensitive to the fact that English has strong affiliations with several complementary disciplines, including Linguistics, Drama, Communication Studies and Philosophy, and that there are cases where disciplinary boundaries overlap. We hope that colleagues in these disciplines will be able to draw on the English benchmarking statement as appropriate. In particular we expect that English Language colleagues will draw on either the English benchmarking statement and/or on the benchmarking statement for Linguistics as appropriate to the intellectual emphasis of their specific institutional provision.

We see the primary task of the 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.

Professor Judy Simons
Chair, English benchmark group

Academic standards - English

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 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 inter-relationships between literary texts, and they may also consider the relationships between literature, other media and other forms of artistic production. 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 production and determination of meaning by historical, social, political, stylistic, ethnic, gender, geographical and other contexts.

1.3. An undergraduate education in English should

- enable students to develop independent critical thinking and judgement;
- engage students imaginatively in the process of reading and analysing complex and sophisticated literary and non-literary texts;
- offer a broad and balanced curriculum;
- help students to understand and appreciate the expressive resources of language;
- problematise the act of reading so that students can reflect critically upon textual 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;
- promote an understanding 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, literacy and communication skills of value in graduate employment;
- provide a basis for further study in English or related disciplines and for teachers of English at all levels;
- provide an intellectually stimulating and satisfying experience of learning and studying, within the distinctive framework of English;
- encourage in students a sense of enthusiasm for the subject and an appreciation of its continuing social and cultural importance.

1.4. The discipline of English in Higher Education is characterised by diverse pedagogical approaches and intellectual emphases. A meaningful benchmark statement for the subject must begin from a premise which recognises both the intrinsic richness of the subject as practised and the source of its future health and growth. The primary task of the benchmarking 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. This benchmarking statement will be kept under review in order to reflect innovation in the subject.

2. The nature and scope of the subject

2.1. In its intellectual character and academic practice Higher Education 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 of Great Britain and Ireland, and of other 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. In this document, the term 'English' should be understood to embrace these activities when conducted within English degree programmes.

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 or exclusively language based. 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.

2.3. 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 distinctively encourages inter- and multi-disciplinary perspectives. Multi-disciplinary work consists of the study of two or more subjects in parallel which may have little or no formal relationship. Inter-disciplinary 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).

2.4. The intellectual sympathy between English and other disciplines is reflected in its student constituency. About half of all undergraduates reading English do so as part of Combined Honours or Joint Honours programmes, and English is a central subject in most modular schemes in the Humanities. 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 benchmarking statement therefore applies to all students taking a significant proportion of English courses as part of their degree programme.

2.5. 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 Higher Education. It is also widely taught in departments of adult and continuing education, at day classes for the public, and at summer schools throughout the UK. Out of forty thousand students currently enrolled on English degree programmes, approximately half are over twenty-five years of age. 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-standard' entrants in higher education.

3. *Subject knowledge and skills*

3.1. Subject knowledge

English incorporates different types of degree programmes with distinctive configurations. Whilst 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 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.

3.2. Key subject-specific skills

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 and analysis of texts;
- 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.

3.3. Generic and graduate skills

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 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;
- 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 and project-work;
- the capacity for independent thought and judgement;
- skills in critical reasoning;
- 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 scholarly information retrieval skills, involving the ability to gather, sift and organise material independently and critically, and evaluate its significance;
- information-technology skills such as word-processing, and the ability to access electronic data;
- time-management and organisational skills, as shown by the ability to plan and present conclusions effectively.

4. *Teaching, learning and assessment*

4.1. Teaching and learning

4.1.1. 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.

4.1.2. There are many appropriate formats in which English may be taught. These include the lecture, the seminar, the workshop, the tutorial, the personal supervision, and various modes of directed but largely independent study. Some work makes use of printed resource packs, audio-visual materials, corpora and a range of electronic media, including CD ROM and the Internet (increasingly so in institutions that have developed distance learning resources), but all English courses are underpinned by access to written texts - both primary and secondary - in the conventional printed form of the book. In different aspects of their work, students develop skills of information search, comprehension and analysis, and problem solving. 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.

4.1.3. 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 focussed discussion of reading 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.

4.1.4. 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 write essays as a fundamental part of their learning experience.

4.1.5. 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.

4.2. Assessment

4.2.1. 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.

4.2.2. 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.

4.2.3. As identified in 4.1.4. above, the essay should be seen as an essential component in the assessment process. 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 IT and bibliographical exercises);

- portfolio work (including creative writing, reflective journals, essay plans, annotated bibliographies, created resources, etc).

4.2.4. 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 as appropriate;
- 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;
- independence of mind and originality of approach in interpretative and written practice;
- fluent and effective communication of ideas, and sophistication of writing skills;
- critical acumen;
- informed engagement with scholarly debates.

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.

5. *Standards*

5.1. Threshold level

This is the minimum requirement that should be reached by Honours graduates.

Graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree will be able to demonstrate an appropriate knowledge of the subject as defined by the breadth of the curriculum indicated in 3.1. above.

Literature students will have studied a substantial range of authors, texts and genres from different historical periods or cultures.

Language students will have studied a variety of approaches to the English language, diachronic and synchronic.

Their knowledge will include awareness of the different ideas and values represented in and through literature and language and of how different critical approaches to them are themselves productive of knowledge.

Graduates in English will be able to demonstrate powers of textual analysis and critical argument and will have an appropriate command of written English.

They will show an awareness of the affective power of language.

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.

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

5.2. Modal level

This is the level of attainment reached by the typical student whose results fall into the main cluster.

Typical Honours graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree will be able to demonstrate an extensive knowledge of the subject as defined by the breadth of the curriculum indicated in 3.1. above and an ability to deploy a conceptual grasp of its areas of debate.

Literature graduates will have studied a substantial range of authors, texts and genres from different historical periods or cultures and will be able to demonstrate an ability to make connections and comparisons across the range of their reading and the understanding they bring to it.

Language graduates will have studied a range of approaches to the English language, diachronic and synchronic, with depth and rigour.

Their knowledge will incorporate the ability to interpret different ideas and values represented in and through literature and language, and will demand a recognition and articulation of how different critical approaches to them are themselves productive of knowledge.

They will be able to demonstrate confident powers of textual analysis and fluent critical argument and will have developed an effective command of written English together with an appropriate range of critical vocabulary and an understanding of its application.

They will show a critical awareness of historical differences and of the affective power of language to shape meaning.

They will be able to engage in critical debate with views other than their own, show independence of thought, and exercise a degree of informed critical judgement.

They will be able to read texts closely and carefully, with attention to the importance of verbal detail, structure and form, and of the role of the reader in the process of communication and interpretation.

They will be able to conduct research through self-formulated 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 argumentative and analytic power.

They will appreciate the importance of scholarly standards of presentation and of writing accurately, clearly and effectively.

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