



Subject Benchmark Statement

Psychology

November 2019

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How can I use this document?

This is the Subject Benchmark Statement for Psychology. It defines the academic standards that can be expected of a graduate, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies, and describes the nature of the subject.

The [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (Quality Code) sets out the Expectations and Core practices that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet. Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland must also meet the Common practices in the Quality Code.

The Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education (QAA) has also published a set of [Advice and Guidance](#), divided into 12 themes, and a number of other resources that support the mandatory part of the Quality Code. Subject Benchmark Statements sit alongside these resources to help providers develop courses and refine curricula but are not part of the regulated requirements for higher education providers in the UK.

This Statement is intended to support you if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of courses of study in psychology or related subjects
- a prospective student thinking about studying this subject, or a current student of the subject, to find out what may be involved
- an employer, to find out about the knowledge and skills generally expected of a graduate in this subject.

Subject Benchmark Statements provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the course but are not intended to represent a national curriculum in a subject or to prescribe set approaches to teaching, learning or assessment. Instead, they allow for flexibility and innovation in course design within a framework agreed by the subject community.

It may be helpful to refer to relevant Advice and Guidance when using this Statement.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Subject Benchmark Statement can be found in QAA's [Glossary](#).

About this Statement

This Subject Benchmark Statement refers to bachelor's degrees with honours in psychology.¹

It has been produced by a group of subject specialists drawn from, and acting on behalf of, the subject community. The process is facilitated by QAA, as is the full consultation with the wider academic community and stakeholder groups each Statement goes through.

In order to ensure the continuing currency of Subject Benchmark Statements, QAA initiates regular reviews of their content, five years after first publication, and every seven years subsequently, or in response to significant changes in the discipline.

Relationship to legislation

Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them, for example by funding bodies. This Statement does not interpret legislation nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. The responsibility for academic standards remains with the higher education provider who awards the degree.

Higher education providers may need to consider other reference points in addition to this Statement in designing, delivering and reviewing courses. These may include requirements set out by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and industry or employer expectations.

Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Subject Benchmark Statement where appropriate. Individual higher education providers are responsible for how they use this information.

Summary of changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement (2016)

This version of the Statement forms its fourth edition, following initial publication of the Subject Benchmark Statement in 2002 and subsequent reviews and revisions in 2007, and 2016.

This latest version of the Statement is the consequence of the revision to the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) which was published in 2018. It has been revised to update references to the Quality Code and other minor changes within the sector. Changes have been made by QAA and confirmed by the past chair of the most recent review group.

There have been some minor revisions to the subject-specific content of the Statement, namely the addition of qualitative and quantitative research methods to paragraph 3.4, and a rewording of paragraph 5.4.

¹ Bachelor's degrees are at level 6 in The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and level 10 in The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland, as published in [The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies](#)

1 Introduction

1.1 Psychology is one of the most popular subjects in higher education in the UK and appeals to students from a wide range of backgrounds. Psychology degrees usually last for three years (four years in Scotland). Most higher education providers offer single honours degrees in psychology, although it is also common to combine psychology with another subject as a subsidiary or minor area of study, or to study psychology as one component of a joint honours degree where both subjects carry equal weight. Psychology may be located in a variety of different schools or faculties in different higher education providers, aligning it with social, natural or biological sciences or with business, health or education, for example. This may lead to different emphases or 'flavours' while still delivering the core areas required for accreditation by the professional body.

1.2 To obtain employment as a practitioner psychologist, further postgraduate study and supervised training are required, normally lasting at least a further three years. By law, from July 2009, anyone describing themselves as a registered psychologist, practitioner psychologist, clinical psychologist, counselling psychologist, educational psychologist, forensic psychologist, health psychologist, occupational psychologist, or sport and exercise psychologist must be registered with the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC), and have successfully completed an HCPC-approved course of training.

1.3 The British Psychological Society accredits undergraduate and postgraduate training in psychology and maintains a public Directory and a List of Chartered Members (formerly the Register of Chartered Psychologists). In order to become a Chartered Psychologist (C.Psychol), students normally need to complete an accredited course in order to acquire the Graduate Basis for Chartership (GBC), followed by additional postgraduate training. For students who have not completed an accredited undergraduate degree, conversion courses are available as a graduate diploma or at master's level. These are also accredited by The British Psychological Society.² Regular reviews and visits are conducted by The British Psychological Society to ensure that accredited degrees continue to reach the necessary standards; any changes to programmes are also reviewed to ensure that the standards are maintained. This Subject Benchmark Statement, however, sets out academic standards for all bachelor's degrees with honours whether these are accredited by The British Psychological Society or not.

1.4 Psychology graduates proceed into a variety of careers. A third of graduates who go into permanent employment as psychologists enter public services (such as the health service, education, the civil service, and the armed forces), and a third go into industry or commerce, for example market research and personnel management. Of the remainder, around one-tenth teach and research in schools, colleges and universities. Due to the wide range of generic skills, and the rigour with which they are taught, training in psychology is an excellent foundation that supports entry into a broad range of careers. In addition to subject skills and knowledge, graduates also develop skills in communication, numeracy, teamwork, critical thinking, computing, independent learning and many others, all of which are highly valued by employers.

1.5 Although this Subject Benchmark Statement is a UK reference point for academic standards in psychology, it recognises the importance of international standards and initiatives in this area.

² The British Psychological Society website: www.bps.org.uk

2 Defining principles and the nature and extent of psychology

2.1 Psychology is an empirical science that aims to understand the mind and behaviour in humans and non-human animals. It spans studies ranging from the observations of basic neural mechanisms to analyses of complex human relationships. The antecedents of modern-day psychology can be found in physics, biology and philosophy, but its methods of enquiry have developed not only from these disciplines but also from other natural, social and mathematical sciences.

2.2 There are defining principles that guide a degree course in psychology. Degrees in psychology:

- aim to produce a scientific understanding of the mind, brain, behaviour and experience, and how they interact with the complex environments in which they exist
- include knowledge and the acquisition of a range of research skills and methods for investigating experience and behaviour, culminating in an ability to conduct research independently
- develop an understanding of the role of empirical evidence in the creation and constraint of theory, and also in how theory guides the collection and interpretation of empirical data
- present multiple perspectives in a way that fosters critical evaluation and reflection
- develop knowledge, leading to an appreciation of theory and research findings, including relevant ethical and sociocultural issues
- lead to an understanding of real-life applications of theory to the full range of experience and behaviour and the application of psychological understanding to real-world questions.

2.3 The combination of knowledge and skills outlined above is sometimes referred to as psychological literacy.

2.4 Psychology is a broad subject area, and can operate as a 'hub' subject, contributing to many of the big questions and challenges facing society. Whatever the particular topic of study and wherever the origins of its methods, psychology attempts to analyse and explain behaviour in a systematic, reproducible way. There is a strong relationship between theory and empirical data, the results of which may find their expression in applications to education, health, industry/commerce and other situations.

2.5 To summarise, psychology is a discipline concerning experience, thought and behaviour that is of immense range and depth. It has evolved its own methodologies from those found in cognate areas. A degree in psychology implies an understanding of historical and contemporary psychological research alongside an appreciation of current and previous theoretical efforts to integrate and interpret empirical findings. A particular strength of training in psychology is the acquisition of critical thinking skills, which are developed within a context of rigorous empirical methodology. Psychology may be seen as a hub discipline, enabling others to converge on shared solutions.

3 Subject knowledge and understanding

3.1 The acquisition and demonstration of conceptual knowledge within core areas, together with an understanding of the empirical bases of the discipline, are necessary features of any honours degree course. The ability to extrapolate and comprehend the applications of knowledge within and across areas of psychology is also a feature of each course.

3.2 The following list of core areas reflects the current scope of psychology. For each of the core areas, a list of examples is provided. These examples are not intended to be either prescriptive or exhaustive and it is recognised that their role in degree courses varies from provider to provider and over time.

3.3 Courses address knowledge both of the areas identified and of the links between them, as well as an understanding of the use of psychological theory to answer real-world questions. Ethical, conceptual, cultural and historical aspects are also included.

- **Biological psychology** for example biological bases of human and non-human animal behaviour, hormones and behaviour, behavioural genetics, neuroscience, typical and atypical neuropsychology, comparative and evolutionary psychology.
- **Cognitive psychology** for example attention, perception, learning, memory, thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, metacognition, language, consciousness and cognitive neuropsychology.
- **Developmental psychology** for example typical and atypical development across the life-span, including childhood, adolescence and aging, attachment, social relations, cognitive and language development and cultural development.
- **Individual differences** for example personality, psychometrics, intelligence, cognitive style, emotion, motivation, mood, positive psychology, physical and mental health (including social, biological and cognitive processes), and diversity.
- **Social psychology** for example social cognition, attribution, attitudes, group processes and intergroup relations, culture, close relationships, social constructionism, self and identity, and leadership.

3.4 **Research methods** are integral to psychology and students obtain a sound knowledge of, and a proven ability to use, a range of both qualitative and quantitative methods appropriately. Knowledge and understanding of how to obtain and analyse evidence is best acquired and demonstrated through extensive and progressive empirical work in laboratory and naturalistic settings through all stages of a degree.

3.5 Psychology students learn the basic principles of sound data collection. Given the broad theoretical scope of psychology, rigorous specialist training is required to engender a critical understanding of the role of experimental design, the choice of research methods employed, and the analytic approach taken, for testing psychological theories.

4 Skills

4.1 Psychology is distinctive in the rich and diverse range of attributes it develops, drawing on skills that are associated both with studying the humanities (for example, critical thinking and essay writing) and other sciences (hypothesis-testing and numeracy).

4.2 In addition, the nature of the discipline, and the kinds of learning opportunities that it provides, allows students to develop and practice a range of generic skills which can be underpinned by their own formal knowledge of psychological processes. For example, communication skills can be enhanced by knowledge of theories of learning, critical thinking can be underpinned by knowledge of cognitive biases, and teamwork can be supported by knowledge of group processes.

4.3 Subject skills are those that relate closely to the subject knowledge and/or are an integral part of any psychology degree, forming part of psychological literacy; these skills are described in paragraph 4.4. Generic skills are transferable skills that are not so closely tied to the subject matter of psychology; these are covered in paragraph 4.5. While the distinction between subject and generic skills is not clear-cut, psychology training allows subject-specific understanding to lead to enhanced generic skills, as noted in paragraph 4.2. In addition, many of the subject-specific skills, including research design, methods and measurement, and statistics, have direct application in professions outside psychology, and many of the generic skills are essential in the work of a professional psychologist.

Subject-specific skills

4.4 On graduating with an honours degree in psychology, students are able to:

- i apply multiple perspectives to psychological issues, recognising that psychology involves a range of research methods, theories, evidence and applications
- ii integrate ideas and findings across the multiple perspectives in psychology and recognise distinctive psychological approaches to relevant issues
- iii identify and evaluate patterns in behaviour, psychological functioning and experience
- iv generate and explore hypotheses and research questions drawing on relevant theory and research
- v carry out empirical studies involving a variety of methods of data collection, including experiments, observation, questionnaires, interviews and focus groups
- vi analyse, present and evaluate quantitative and qualitative data and evaluate research findings
- vii employ evidence-based reasoning and examine practical, theoretical and ethical issues associated with the range of methodologies
- viii use a variety of psychological tools, including specialist software, laboratory equipment and psychometric instruments
- ix apply psychological knowledge ethically and safely to real-world problems
- x critically evaluate psychological theory and research
- xi carry out an extensive piece of empirical research that requires them individually to demonstrate a range of research skills, including planning, considering and resolving ethical issues, analysis and dissemination of findings.

Generic skills

- 4.5 On graduating with a degree in psychology, students are able to:
- i communicate effectively. Effective communication involves developing a cogent argument supported by relevant evidence and being sensitive to the needs and expectations of an audience. This is accomplished through specific demands to write both essays and scientific reports, and through experience in making oral presentations to groups
 - ii demonstrate numerical reasoning skills
 - iii be computer literate, displaying at the very least skill in the use of word processing, databases and analytic software packages
 - iv retrieve and organise information effectively. Psychology graduates are familiar with collecting and organising stored information found in library books and journal collections, and online, critically evaluating primary and secondary sources
 - v recognise what is required for effective teamwork and articulate their own strengths and weaknesses in this regard. The complexity of the factors that shape behaviour and social interaction will be familiar to psychology graduates and will make them more aware of the basis of successful and problematic interpersonal relationships
 - vi take responsibility for their own learning and skill development; this will include effective personal planning, self-reflection and project management skills, so they become more independent and pragmatic as learners.

5 Teaching, learning and assessment

5.1 A degree in psychology covers specific subject knowledge (including core areas of the discipline), subject-specific skills and generic skills, with a particular emphasis on conducting and reporting empirical research, including at least one substantive piece of work conducted under supervision.

5.2 Courses are designed to ensure that students acquire the skills and knowledge outlined above, and need to demonstrate that the learning, teaching and assessment methods are fit for that purpose. It is recognised within psychology that there is a great variety of ways in which material can be presented and skills developed.

5.3 Practical work in the discipline covers a wide variety of methodologies, and includes both quantitative and qualitative methods. The practical elements expose the student to a wide range of topics reflecting the academic content of psychology.

5.4 Courses equip students with the ability to apply ethical principles from the discipline across a range of contexts, including conducting ethical research, ethical conduct in the workplace and social responsibility. These values are based upon the guidance on appropriate ethical knowledge and practice at undergraduate level published by the British Psychological Society.³

Teaching and learning

5.5 Teaching and learning approaches involve a change from initially supported and guided study to more independent and self-directed study, enabling graduates to take a critical stance to theories, findings and approaches of the discipline. Throughout psychology courses emphasis is given to active learning and the acquisition of both generic and subject-specific skills and abilities.

5.6 Many different forms of teaching and learning are appropriate to psychology. They include laboratory classes, workshops, lectures, seminars, individual tutorials, guided reading, independent study, digital learning opportunities, working in student groups, distance learning, individual project supervision and dissertations. Many courses incorporate problem-based learning approaches, experiential learning, student-led learning and work-based learning.

Assessment

5.7 The choice of assessment methods is clearly related to the learning outcomes they seek to measure. Assessment methods may include formal examinations (which can be seen, unseen and/or open-book), multiple-choice tests, assessed essays, practical reports, reflective reports, other reports, information technology use, case-studies, portfolios, dissertations and formal assessment of performance in oral presentations and debates, including seminar and individual presentations. A diversity of assessment methods is encouraged to ensure that the course enables students to develop and demonstrate a full range of knowledge and skills, through individual and group work. Assessment criteria are clearly articulated, and lead to the progressive development of critical thinking skills.

³ The British Psychological Society (2015), *Guidance on teaching and assessment of ethical competence in psychology education*, available from: www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/guidance-teaching-and-assessment-ethical-competence-psychology-education-2015

5.8 Students are provided with opportunities to demonstrate that they are conversant with the core aspects of the subject, which are covered in the assessment schedule. A graduate of psychology will have successfully completed a series of practical reports throughout their course, culminating in an empirical project reporting on a substantial piece of research (or a piece of work which delivers the same learning outcomes of equal quality). The project typically involves the collection of original empirical data from participants, or equivalent alternatives such as computational modelling of empirical data or secondary data analysis, such as a meta-analysis.

6 Benchmark standards

6.1 These **threshold standards** are the minimum standards necessary for a student to graduate with an honours degree in psychology. The standards are phrased in terms of the knowledge and skills that a graduate at that level would be expected to be able to demonstrate.

6.2 These provide a reference point for setting and maintaining academic standards for psychology conversion courses leading to the award of a Graduate Diploma at level 6 (FHEQ) or level 9 (FQHEIS). They will also be helpful as a starting point for psychology conversion courses at level 7 (FHEQ) or level 11 (FQHEIS) although outcomes for these courses must ultimately align with the appropriate levels on the Qualifications Frameworks.⁴

Subject knowledge and understanding

6.3 On graduating with an honours degree in psychology, graduates are able to:

- understand the scientific underpinnings of psychology as a discipline, its historical origins, development and limitations
- recognise the inherent variability and diversity of psychological functioning and its significance
- demonstrate systematic knowledge and critical understanding of a range of influences on psychological functioning, how they are conceptualised across the core areas as outlined in paragraphs 4.4 and 4.5 and how they interrelate
- demonstrate detailed knowledge of several specialised areas and/or applications, some of which are at the cutting edge of research in the discipline
- demonstrate a systematic knowledge of a range of research paradigms, research methods and measurement techniques, including statistics and probability, and be aware of their limitations.

Subject-specific skills

6.4 On graduating with an honours degree in psychology, graduates are able to:

- i reason scientifically, understand the role of evidence and make critical judgements about arguments in psychology
- ii adopt multiple perspectives and systematically analyse the relationships between them
- iii detect meaningful patterns in behaviour and evaluate their significance
- iv recognise the subjective and variable nature of individual experience
- v pose, operationalise and critique research questions
- vi demonstrate substantial competence in research skills through practical activities
- vii reason analytically and demonstrate competence in a range of quantitative and qualitative methods
- viii competently initiate, design, conduct and report on an empirically-based research project under appropriate supervision, and recognise its theoretical, practical and methodological implications and limitations
- ix be aware of ethical principles and approval procedures and demonstrate these in relation to personal study, particularly with regard to the research project, and be aware of the ethical context of psychology as a discipline.

⁴ Available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks

Generic skills

- 6.5 On graduating with an honours degree in psychology, graduates are able to:
- i communicate ideas and research findings by written, oral and visual means
 - ii interpret and use numerical, textual and other forms of data
 - iii be computer literate, for the purposes of furthering their own learning and in the analysis and presentation of ideas and research findings
 - iv solve problems by clarifying questions, considering alternative solutions and evaluating outcomes
 - v be sensitive to, and take account of, contextual and interpersonal factors in groups and teams
 - vi undertake self-directed study and project management, in order to meet desired objectives
 - vii take charge of their own learning, and reflect and evaluate personal strengths and weaknesses for the purposes of future learning.

Appendix: Membership of the review groups for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Psychology

The fourth edition, published in 2019, was revised by QAA to align the content with the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education, published in 2018. Proposed revisions were checked and verified by a member of the review group of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Psychology from 2016.

Dr Simon Goodson	University of Huddersfield; Chair of BPS Division of Academic Researchers and Teachers of Psychology
Simon Bullock	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Psychology (2016)

Details provided below are as published in the third edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement.

Professor Thom Baguley	Nottingham Trent University
Dr Phil Banyard	Nottingham Trent University
Dr Renee Bleau	University of Glasgow
Professor John Clibbens (Chair)	Birmingham City University
Dr Lisa Morrison Coulthard	The British Psychological Society
Professor David I Donaldson	University of Stirling; The Association of Heads of Psychology Departments
Dr Simon Goodson	University of Huddersfield; Chair of BPS Division of Academic Researchers and Teachers of Psychology
Dr Julie Hulme	Keele University
Professor Michelle Lee	Swansea University
Professor Catriona Morrison	University of Bradford
Professor Stephen Newstead	Plymouth University
Dr Rachel Shaw	Aston University
Dr Liz Simpson	Ulster University
Dr Niamh Stack (Deputy Chair)	University of Glasgow; Chair of BPS Undergraduate Education Committee
Employer representative	
Lesley-Anne Livesey	PLUS Stirling
Student reader	
Chris Hardy	University College London
QAA officers	
Dr Catherine Kerfoot	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Natalja Sokorevica	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Psychology (2007)

Details provided below are as published in the second edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement.

Professor Peter Banister	The Manchester Metropolitan University
Professor Stephen Newstead	University of Plymouth
Professor Dominic Abrams (Chair)	University of Kent
Dr Peter Wright	University of Edinburgh
Annie Trapp	Higher Education Academy; Psychology Network
Professor Dominic Upton	University of Worcester
Dr Richard Latto	University of Liverpool
Professor Uta Frith	University College London
Dr Lisa Morrison Coulthard (Adviser)	The British Psychological Society

Membership of the original benchmark statement group for psychology (2002)

Details below are as published in the original Subject Benchmark Statement for Psychology.

Professor Peter Banister	The Manchester Metropolitan University
Professor Diane Berry	University of Reading
Professor Martin Conway	University of Bristol
Professor Steven Cooper	University of Liverpool
Professor Hadyn Ellis	Cardiff University
Dr Pamela Maras	University of Greenwich
Dr Carol McGuinness	The Queen's University of Belfast
Professor Peter Morris	University of Lancaster
Professor Stephen Newstead (Chair)	University of Plymouth
Professor Denis Parker	Glasgow Caledonian University
Professor Anne Woollett	University of East London
Lisa Morrison (Secretary)	The British Psychological Society

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