



# **Subject benchmark statement**

## **Area studies**

**Draft for consultation September 2007**

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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**<sup>1</sup>. 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 2002. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 2006<sup>2</sup>. 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 guidance<sup>3</sup> 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 Infrastructure<sup>4</sup>, 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*<sup>5</sup>, and also through the Equality Challenge Unit<sup>6</sup> which is established to promote equality and diversity in higher education.

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<sup>2</sup> In England, Scotland and Wales

<sup>3</sup> 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/employers\\_and\\_service\\_provider/disability\\_equality\\_duty/sectoral\\_guidance/further\\_and\\_higher\\_education.aspx](http://www.drc-gb.org/employers_and_service_provider/disability_equality_duty/sectoral_guidance/further_and_higher_education.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> An explanation of the Academic Infrastructure, and the roles of subject benchmark statements within it, is available at [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure)

<sup>5</sup> 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](http://www.drc-gb.org/employers_and_service_provider/education/higher_education.aspx)

<sup>6</sup> Equality Challenge Unit, [www.ecu.ac.uk](http://www.ecu.ac.uk)

## Foreword

Important changes have taken place in the field since the publication of the last subject benchmark statement for area studies in 2001. They are reflected in the revised benchmark statement that is presented here. These changes include a clear distinction between knowledge and understanding on the one hand and skills (both subject-specific and generic) on the other. This distinction is now common place within programme specifications and within individual module descriptions within area studies. The review group felt that this should be reflected in the new benchmark statement.

The other major areas of development since the publication of the original benchmark statement are a renewed emphasis on the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of the subject area, and the higher profile given to the acquisition of relevant language skills. While language learning at general, further and higher education levels generally is perceived as in decline, area studies programmes have experienced an increase in student numbers enrolled on language courses, and language acquisition has become a central element in many (though not all) area studies programmes.

Furthermore, whether or not programmes of study include these language courses, the study of a region is approached in area studies programmes from diverse disciplinary perspectives, utilising a knowledge base, methodological tools and generic skills drawn from across the range of arts, humanities and social sciences. This is occurring both at the programme level in a multidisciplinary manner, but also in interdisciplinary studies that form an element of specific modules. This development, which is potentially one of the most exciting in area studies and which, to an extent, gives it its distinctive character, has been incorporated in the revisions to the statement. The review group looks forward to receiving comments from the subject community and hope that the revised statement, to be published in 2008, will form a useful guide for those in higher education in the United Kingdom (UK) who are designing, modifying and implementing area studies programmes over the next five years.

Robert Gleave  
Chair of the Area Studies Subject Benchmark Statement Review Group

**August 2007**

# 1 Introduction

1.1 Area studies programmes in the UK higher education sector provide dynamic and diverse opportunities for students to focus their learning on parts of the world for which they feel a strong intellectual curiosity. UK HEIs offer a wide range of programmes in which a variety of disciplinary approaches are employed. Students thereby gain in-depth understanding of the culture, history, politics and economics of particular regions and countries. Many area studies programmes also include the study of relevant languages and encourage students to employ these language skills in their learning and research.

1.2 Area studies programmes are emphatically multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, encouraging the analysis of an area from various approaches drawn from the arts, humanities and the social sciences. Such an approach enables students in area studies to acquire a unique depth and breadth of insight into the social, cultural and political dynamic of a region.

1.3 Academics and students working in area studies participate in a vibrant subject area that crosses disciplinary boundaries and is best positioned to react to emerging and challenging areas of study. Within the area studies framework, UK HEIs offer programmes that have as their focus the regions of (or sub-regions within) North America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Australasia. An indicative, but not exhaustive, list of area studies degree programmes is provided in appendix A.

1.4 The vitality of area studies within UK HEIs is maintained by a high degree of flexibility within degree programmes and consequently this subject benchmark statement constitutes a set of non-prescriptive guidelines, rather than a checklist, for those designing programme specifications in area studies.

1.5 Area studies is offered as single honours, joint honours and as major and minor elements of combined honours degrees. This statement is intended to assist in the design of both whole degree programmes and the relevant area studies part of degree programmes.

1.6 The multidisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary nature of area studies provides a rich, rewarding and diverse student experience. Area studies students operate across academic disciplines, learning how to integrate a variety of approaches in formulating and solving problems, and using diverse materials and information sources. This synthesising prerogative in area studies can work across, as well as interrogate, traditional disciplinary boundaries in innovative ways, meaning that area studies is well positioned to respond to new local and global issues, and academic debates with both established and emerging methodologies. These are major strengths of the field of area studies, giving it a vitality that must not be constrained by the benchmarking process.

1.7 Area studies degrees provide a means for students to acquire specialised regional knowledge while also developing the intellectual skills and qualities of mind associated with undergraduate achievement in arts, humanities and social sciences subjects. By giving prominence to the distinctiveness and significance of specific areas, and fostering a critical awareness of diversity across societies, both past

and present, area studies has a particular contribution to make in the context of increasingly multicultural societies. Moreover, with globalisation come new questions about local identity, and global cooperation, area studies is centrally placed to consider the issues that emerge from the interplay between the global and the local.

1.8 Area studies students gain parallel and complementary knowledge and skills in programmes that frequently offer the possibility of study abroad. Those programmes where languages are studied provide access to varying levels of language competence. Area studies programmes in which language skills play a central integrative function may wish to refer to the subject benchmark statement for languages and related studies.

1.9 Graduates in area studies are well placed to enter an ever more globalised job market. Area studies programmes encourage in their students a strong sense of perspective and flexibility in thinking, and their graduates are well attuned to diversity. All of these features have strong employer appeal in an increasingly globalised world, in which the possession of intercultural competences and relevant language skills has never been more important. The particular combination of specialist knowledge and transferable skills that area studies graduates offer is vitally important in a wide range of employment sectors, including government, business and commerce, diplomacy, communications and the media, at both international and national level.

1.10 Area studies graduates may take a number of postgraduate pathways: into vocational programmes, single discipline study or further multidisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary work. The diversity and strength of area studies programmes at undergraduate level has ensured that a range of HEIs have developed postgraduate area studies programmes, in some cases even where they do not have parallel undergraduate provision. Such courses are clearly also appealing to single discipline undergraduates who wish to take more diversified postgraduate studies, and are attracted by the multidisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary challenges of postgraduate work in area studies.

## **2 Defining principles and nature of area studies**

2.1 Area studies is a generic term applied to the study of the society or societies of a given geographical space. The empirical content of area studies programmes therefore varies widely. Programmes in area studies are multidisciplinary (grounded in two or more different academic disciplines) and/or interdisciplinary (explicitly integrating two or more disciplines).

2.2 The principal objective of area studies programmes is to study the area itself, using whichever disciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches are most appropriate to understand the aspects of the area on which they wish to concentrate. Comparative analysis or understanding can be implicitly or explicitly embedded in the curricula.

2.3 Area studies programmes involve in-depth study of single countries/regions or groups of countries/regions. When programmes cover multistate regions, such as Southeast Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa, they may involve explicit or implicit comparative study of societies within the region, international relations of those societies with each other and with states outside the region, as well as the transnational processes affecting those societies. Programmes concentrating on Europe usually give prominence to the institutions and operation of the European Union and other international organisations within the region.

2.4 The coherence of any area studies programme can be conceptualised in two ways:

- the degree of methodological and conceptual coherence, deriving from the understanding and application of different disciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches
- the overall cohesion of a range of modules focused on a specific society or set of geographically and culturally related societies.

2.5 There is always a complex trade-off between breadth and depth within and between these dimensions.

2.6 Area studies programmes provide access to training in a language other than English, where this is appropriate to the objectives of the degree. Non-specialist language competences may be taken to form part of the area studies component in, for example, a degree programme termed Latin American studies, or it may be considered to be distinct in some joint and combined honours programmes. Proportions may vary, as suggested by titles such as European studies 'and' or 'with' Spanish (where the conventional use of 'and' or 'with' signifies differing proportions of the total programme).

2.7 It is considered desirable, though for practical reasons not always possible, for honours degree programmes in area studies to include one or more periods spent in the region studied. These periods are normally a credit-weighted, integral element of an area studies degree programme. The period can vary from a week or two, to a semester, to an entire academic year according to the objectives of the programme specification. The period of residence abroad may involve formal study in an overseas HEI, research for a project, a placement and/or employment. Whatever the pattern, its intended value lies in students' direct exposure to a culture which they are studying, thereby enhancing both their intercultural awareness and competences and their employability (see paragraph 1.7).

### **3 Knowledge and understanding**

3.1 Since area studies is multi and interdisciplinary, the field covers a wide range of subject materials and methods of study. Characteristically, area studies programmes develop a broad and complementary range of knowledge and understanding. Programme specifications will indicate what is offered by, and is distinctive for, different providers, but knowledge and understanding of the history and culture of a designated geographic area, past and present, is central. Many programmes will achieve their aims by a core placed within a wider context of specialised offerings, including learning a language other than English relevant to the area studied, where appropriate. Often an in-depth study of some aspect of the area is required and, when available, study abroad offers opportunities to enhance knowledge by direct contact with, and immersion in, the culture of the area under study.

3.2 Particular programmes will promote a knowledge and understanding of:

- the area studied, either through several disciplines or through interdisciplinary approaches
- the subject area and the area/region(s) studied within a world context
- relevant scholarship originating from both within and outside the area studied
- the dynamics of social change in the subject area

- the multifaceted nature of the subject area its complex relationship to other disciplines and interdisciplinary formations
- key methods and concepts of contributory disciplines and interdisciplinary formations
- the similarities and differences between areas of the world, thus fostering cross-cultural and international perspectives
- the merits of contrasting methodologies and theories applied to the analysis of the region studied.

## **4 Subject-specific and generic skills**

4.1 Due to their multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary composition, area studies programmes provide one of the most productive environments, offering students excellent opportunities for the acquisition of both subject-specific and generic (transferable) skills.

4.2 A number of subject-specific skills are characteristic of an honours student in area studies. In different programmes within the field, the manner of delivery and in the degree of emphasis on each of the following skills will vary. Specific programmes will offer opportunities to students to pursue their own routes and develop their own skills. The subject-specific skills acquired on completion of an honours degree in area studies will include:

- an ability to critically engage with the area studied from a number of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, including anthropology, archaeology, art history, cultural studies, economics, film and media studies, geography, history, language(s) other than English, literature, philosophy, politics, religious studies and sociology
- the ability to compare and contrast the appropriateness of different disciplinary approaches in an examination of the area studied
- the ability to use and critically interrogate a range of primary and secondary written and/or oral and/or visual sources, in their original language, where appropriate
- skills in the construction of bibliographies, library and internet research skills, proficiency in reading and analysis of texts both in English, and, in relevant degree programmes, in languages other than English, and abilities in the analysis of visual and aural material as a medium for understanding another culture
- in relevant degree programmes, skills in a language other than English relevant to the region studied and an ability to deploy these language skills, at an appropriate level, within a research context.

4.3 Honours degree programmes in area studies will also provide students with the opportunity to acquire a wide range of generic skills, including an ability to:

- read and use materials both incisively and with sensitivity, and to compare and contrast ideas and concepts found within different disciplinary and geographical contexts
- identify and resolve problems
- communicate ideas with clarity, coherence and persuasiveness
- synthesise information, adopt critical appraisals and develop reasoned argument based on such appraisals
- select and apply appropriate methodologies and theories

- critically reflect upon the scope and limitations of what has been ascertained and understood
- analyse issues proficiently in the light of evidence and argument
- work with a significant amount of independence, demonstrated in self-direction, self-management and intellectual initiative both in learning and studying and in time management
- present materials orally in a clear and effective manner, using audio-visual aids, where appropriate, and answering questions from an audience
- listen effectively and work creatively, flexibly and adaptively with others
- write and think under pressure and meet deadlines.

## **5 Teaching, learning and assessment**

5.1 Teaching, learning and assessment styles flow from the multi and interdisciplinary approaches that make up specific area studies programmes. The programmes will provide opportunities for students to integrate component disciplines and interdisciplinary approaches with regional knowledge, using appropriately designed teaching approaches and assessment strategies. Variety is a key feature in area studies teaching, learning and assessment. One of the great strengths of areas studies programmes lies in the opportunities which they offer for students to acquire perspectives and skills from more than one discipline or formation.

5.2 An important aim of area studies is to develop graduates who are able to take a variety of approaches in their studies, to acquire skills in integrating and synthesising materials from diverse sources and, where appropriate, to develop skills in a language other than English relevant to the area studied.

### **Teaching techniques**

5.3 Students will be introduced to the area they are studying within a coherent and appropriate framework as defined by the programme provider. Pedagogical techniques will vary according to the focus of the individual programme. Some area studies courses will have a contemporary flavour while others will pay greater attention to historical perspectives. Some programmes may also place a varying emphasis on the acquisition of skills in a relevant language other than English. The pedagogical techniques used in an individual programme will reflect these differences. All programmes should teach students about methods for the location and access of information, as well as the critical and comparative use of it.

### **Learning outcomes**

5.4 Area studies programmes are uniquely situated to provide a rich opportunity for the integration of knowledge and suitable disciplinary approaches in a focused study of a particular society or region. Upon completion of their programme of study, students will possess knowledge of a particular region or area of the world and subject-specific skills in its analysis. They may also have acquired a range of skills in a language other than English relevant to the area studied. In addition, graduates will have acquired generic skills, including the ability to locate and access information, and make appropriate and effective use of information from a variety of sources, such as libraries and the internet.

## **Assessment methods**

5.5 Among the variety of assessment methods used, students will be given extensive opportunities to demonstrate relevant knowledge and skills. They will also have the ability to demonstrate their capacity to employ and/or integrate different subject approaches, area-based materials and information sources in constructive, thoughtful and critical ways. Essay and report-writing and the extended essay or dissertation are likely to be key instruments for this kind of assessment. Where appropriate, attention will also be given to assessing skills in a language other than English relevant to the area studied. Assessments methods used will go beyond the established criteria for the disciplines in that students will be assessed on the depth and breadth of their understanding of the historical and cultural characteristics of a particular region or area, while at the same time drawing on their knowledge of a number of disciplines where appropriate.

## **6 Benchmark standards**

6.1 Benchmark standards for area studies graduates are defined at 'threshold' and 'typical' levels of achievement. The threshold standard is the minimally acceptable attainment of an honours graduate. The standard expected of the majority of honours graduates is defined as the typical standard. Graduates at both levels will show knowledge and understanding of their area. Those at threshold level will do so by basic presentation of information, evidence and argument. Graduates at typical level will show abilities to evaluate information independently, to assess evidence critically, and to develop argument individually.

### **Subject-specific skills**

#### **Threshold level**

6.2 On graduating with an honours degree in area studies, students should have the ability to:

- demonstrate knowledge of the area; its history, culture and society, as defined by the programme provider
- demonstrate awareness of relevant vocabulary and of contributory disciplines and theories
- describe concepts from different disciplines and/or interdisciplinary approaches as a means of understanding the area under study
- demonstrate awareness of a diverse range of relevant information and research resources
- where relevant, acquire knowledge of a language as required by the degree programme concerned.

### **Typical level**

6.3 On graduating with an honours degree in area studies, students should have the ability to:

- critically analyse and demonstrate detailed knowledge of the area; its history, culture and society as defined by the programme provider
- demonstrate awareness and critical understanding of relevant vocabulary of contributory disciplines and critical theories, and the capacity to assess and compare the merits of contrasting approaches
- describe, differentiate and compare concepts from different disciplines and/or interdisciplinary approaches as a means of understanding the area under study
- demonstrate awareness of, and ability to use, evaluate and compare a diverse range of relevant information and research resources
- where relevant, acquire knowledge of a language as required by the degree programme concerned and apply these linguistic skills effectively at an appropriate level.

### **Generic skills**

#### **Threshold level**

6.4 On graduating with an honours degree in area studies, students should have the ability to:

- identify and represent a range of issues and differing opinions
- identify and offer resolutions to relevant problems
- synthesise information and develop argument
- communicate ideas with clarity and coherence
- work independently and to deadlines within a guided framework
- respond to constructive feedback
- employ effective essay and report writing skills, showing ability to deploy material from a variety of sources
- develop collaborative skills in group work to achieve shared goals
- utilise proficiently a range of information technology resources, including word-processing, use email, search databases and text files, and locate and employ internet sites.

#### **Typical level**

6.5 On graduating with an honours degree in area studies, students should have the ability to:

- identify, represent, debate and compare a range of issues and differing opinions
- identify and analyse problems using relevant approaches, and reflect upon the scope and limitations of what has been ascertained and understood
- synthesise information, adopt critical appraisals, and develop reasoned argument based on such appraisals
- communicate ideas with clarity, coherence and persuasiveness
- work independently and to deadlines within a guided framework, with a capacity to define problems/questions and to know how to set about finding answers

- reflect on personal learning and respond productively to constructive feedback
- employ effective essay and report writing skills showing ability to integrate and critically assess material from a variety of sources
- develop collaborative skills in group work, and contribute creatively, flexibly and adaptively to the achievement of shared goals
- utilise proficiently a range of information technology resources, including word-processing, use email, search databases and text files, and locate, employ and evaluate internet sites.

## **Appendix A: Indicative list of degree programme titles in area studies**

This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but instead contains the most common and popular area studies degree programme titles used in UK HEIs:

- African studies
- American studies
- Canadian studies
- Asia Pacific studies
- Celtic studies
- Chinese studies
- East Asian studies
- European studies
- Hispanic studies
- international studies
- Latin American studies
- Middle Eastern studies
- Oriental studies
- Scandinavian studies
- Slavonic studies
- South Asian studies
- Southeast Asian studies.

Area studies degree programmes that include a significant language study component may also draw upon the subject benchmark statement for languages and related studies.

## **Appendix B: Membership of the review group for the subject benchmark statement for area studies**

Professor Tony Chafer	University of Portsmouth
Professor Philip Davies	De Montfort University and the British Library
Dr Robert Gleave (Chair)	University of Exeter
Professor James Grayson	University of Sheffield
Dr Susan Hodgett	University of Ulster and Secretary, UK Council for Area Studies Association

## **Appendix C: Membership of the original benchmarking group for area studies**

Details below appear as published in the original subject benchmark statement for area studies (2002).

Professor Janet Beer	The Manchester Metropolitan University
Professor George Blazyca	University of Paisley
Professor Susan Castillo	University of Glasgow
Professor Philip Davies (Chair)	De Montfort University and the British Library
Professor Chris Flood	University of Surrey
Professor Pandeli Glavanis	University of Northumbria at Newcastle
Dr Andrew Hassam	University of Wales, Lampeter
Dr Philip Jaggard	University of London
Dr E Ulrich Kratz	University of London
Professor Anthony McFarlane	University of Warwick
Professor George McKay	University of Central Lancashire
Professor Margaret Walsh	University of Nottingham