

**History**  
**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 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.

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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/library/publications/disability\\_equality\\_duty/further\\_and\\_higher\\_education.aspx](http://www.drc-gb.org/library/publications/disability_equality_duty/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

Consultation with the relevant subject associations confirmed that the history community remains broadly satisfied with the subject benchmark statement for history and that there is no need for radical amendment. A meeting of subject representatives identified a small number of modifications designed to amplify and clarify the original subject benchmark statement. These have mostly taken the form of additions to the text to provide further clarity and emphasis and to take account of important recent developments both generally in higher education and in the teaching and learning of history at honours level. The subject representatives also considered detailed comments on these revisions made by subject associations and higher education institutions. As a result of these, some further amendments were made. The main changes from the original subject benchmark statement include:

- more reference to information and communication technology methods in teaching and learning
- recognising the contribution and value of history education to careers and employability of graduates
- greater acknowledgement of the importance of visual and material culture as historical evidence
- further comment on the ability to employ critical thinking
- acknowledgement of the growing number and importance of learning activities such as fieldwork, community-based projects, work placements and so on
- rearticulation of the statement on performance standards in the interests of greater clarity.

The change that may be most noticeable to readers who are familiar with the original subject benchmark statement is the removal of the annexes. Annex 1, Assessment criteria for examination by essays under timed conditions, has been taken out because it is considered to be more appropriate to the remit of the Higher Education Academy's Subject Centre. Annex 2, A statement of the threshold standard, has been absorbed within the main body of this revised subject benchmark statement (see paragraphs 9.1 and 11.1).

**December 2006**

# **1 Introduction**

1.1 In the first instance, QAA defined the task of benchmarking groups as producing 'broad statements which represent general expectations about standards, particularly at the threshold level, for the award of honours degrees in the field.' Following discussions with QAA, it was agreed that the original benchmarking group for history would focus upon providing a framework for judging programmes which set an acceptable level attainable in principle by the typical history student. The original benchmarking group did not consider that its task was to provide a basis for judgements to be made about a particular student's learning achievement, though a statement (paragraph 9.1) has been provided which makes reference to judgements in this respect. The benchmark statement now forms part of a framework of external reference points (the Academic Infrastructure) that will be used by external reviewers in making judgements about a higher education institution's capacity to deliver on standards.

1.2 The term 'programme' is used to refer to courses of study leading to a degree award while the term 'course' is used to refer to modules or units within a degree programme. The statement is concerned with the criteria relating to the work of students completing honours degree programmes, not with those relating to earlier stages and exit points. However, the criteria relating to programmes are relevant to every stage of progression to the honours degree, from the first year onwards. It is recognised that provision in the subject is very extensive through single, combined honours and interdisciplinary programmes. The principal concern of this benchmark statement is with single honours programmes leading to an award in history, but the recommendations often relate more broadly. In programme design, approval and review of joint degrees, it would seem sensible to take notice of the general tenor of the subject benchmark statements for the two subjects concerned. It is accepted that organisational patterns vary across the sector. Where the document refers to departments, this is a shorthand for history subject groups, however organised.

## **2 Guiding assumptions**

2.1 History differs from many subjects in that historians do not recognise a specific body of required knowledge or a core with surrounding options. It is taken as self-evident that knowledge and understanding of the human past is of incalculable value both to the individual and to society at large, and that the first object of education in history is to enable this to be acquired. It is accepted that there is variation in how the vast body of knowledge which constitutes the subject is tackled at undergraduate degree level. This entails an approach which concentrates on using knowledge in order to develop certain skills and qualities of mind. The focus in this subject benchmark statement is on how knowledge is used to acquire these skills and qualities. The form of the argument follows from this. The work has been guided throughout by the belief that statement should refer to everything that is crucial and integral to the issue of standards. In other words, the view was taken that it will not be possible for academic reviewers to make judgements about academic standards in history without some consideration of every aspect of a degree programme that is considered here. Moreover, it is believed that departmental statements about the framework of programmes, if they are to be properly useful to both staff and students, will need to cover all the ground that is covered here. This subject benchmark statement presents a statement on performance for a number of levels of student achievement which should be sought and achieved in key areas of the discipline.

2.2 The benchmarking group saw its task as:

- to lay out criteria for judging the suitability and adequacy of single-honours degree courses in history
- to do this in a way that is as specific as possible without undermining the principle that there are many different suitable and adequate ways of constructing and making available the great richness and diversity of history
- to do it in a way that recognises also the need for adaptability to new academic developments in the field, and innovations in course structures and teaching methods.

2.3 This statement insists that teaching and learning are evolving processes and that it is not the intention of this benchmark to freeze the teaching of history in a particular model. The subject benchmark statement should be seen as a starting point: departments and subject groups will have the chance to demonstrate how benchmark standards can be built on by the provision of additional or perhaps alternative opportunities.

2.4 Full account has been taken of the particular characteristics of history as a discipline. Its subject matter, distinguishing it from other humanities and social sciences, consists of the attempts of human beings in the past to organise life materially and conceptually, individually and collectively, while the object of studying these things is to widen students' experience and develop qualities of perception and judgement. History provides a distinctive education by providing a sense of the past, an awareness of the development of differing values, systems and societies and the inculcation of critical yet tolerant personal attitudes. History's reciprocal relationship with other disciplines can have an important influence on the experience of the student of the subject.

2.5 It is recognised that the concepts, theories and methodologies of the social sciences are themselves used by many historians, most obviously, but by no means exclusively, within courses in economic and social history. There has been a long and important tradition in the United Kingdom (UK) of teaching and writing history within a social science framework, which continues both within distinct degree programmes in economic and social history and as an important feature in many degree programmes in history. Where history is taught within the context of the social sciences, it is recognised students will need to devote considerable time to acquiring a knowledge of one or more social science. In general, students of all types of history - cultural and political as well as economic and social - should have an awareness of relevant and appropriate concepts and theories.

2.6 The benchmarking group was convinced that particular types of skill, quality, and accomplishment are not connected solely to particular types of course provision or subject matter. Just as there is no one model for a programme, there will be no one model for the relationship between course provision and students' attainments. Any idea of mechanical progression in history is rejected. Skills and qualities are acquired cumulatively and iteratively.

2.7 Good undergraduate history teaching takes a variety of forms, and programmes quite legitimately combine different teaching methods in a number of ways. This variety arises from the different interests and abilities of individual scholars, from the requirements of different areas of the field of history, and from the fact that departments



or subject groups in different institutions have access to different combinations of teaching resources. Each programme should define its own desired outcomes in ways that command general credibility, and departments, in designing their teaching to fulfil those outcomes, should recognise the need to assure their standards by means of the professional external scrutiny provided by institutional peer review, external examiners and QAA's review schemes.

2.8 Assessment is a critical element in the educational process and an essential element in effective learning. It is, therefore, recommended that all departments should develop a clear assessment policy which is consistent with the learning outcomes of its degree schemes. The policy documentation should specify clearly what students are expected to learn, how their work will be assessed, and the relationship between the two. At the same time, departments should think carefully about and explain the relationship between the functions of formative and summative assessment, ie between assessment designed as feedback on progress and assessment for degree award and classification purposes.

2.9 Important abilities and qualities of mind are acquired through the study of history which are readily transferable to many occupations and careers. Some of these qualities and abilities are generic, in that they are imparted by most degree programmes in the humanities and social sciences. But degree-level study in history also instils ways of thinking which are intrinsic to the discipline, while being no less transferable. These include a respect for historical context and evidence, a greater awareness of the historical processes unfolding in our own time, and a deeper understanding of the varied traditions current today. These qualities of mind and abilities are most effectively and economically developed by deep and prolonged immersion in, and engagement with, the practice, methods and material of the subject itself. The cumulative acquisition of, and ability to apply transferable skills, and the development of students as competent historians thus necessarily proceed hand-in-hand. The link between the two lies ultimately in the habits of mind or intellectual approach developed by students who have been trained as capable practising historians. The critical, reflective and creative capacities fostered through the study of the subject will continue to be of value and relevance both in further study and in whatever employment graduate historians undertake. The skills acquired in studying history are highly relevant to a wide variety of careers. History graduates commonly obtain employment in commercial, industrial and public service management, business and finance professions, marketing, sales and public relations, teaching and lecturing, librarianship, and archive and museum work. History also has a strong record of students continuing to further study at postgraduate level.

2.10 It is taken as axiomatic that students must progress and that well-designed programmes facilitate their progression. History programmes do not impart knowledge and skills to be passively absorbed: reading, discussion and writing, and engagement, exploration and discovery are essential. But the importance of historical knowledge is stressed. The historian's skills and qualities of mind are developed through the processes of acquiring, evaluating and discussing historical knowledge in the courses and the independent study that history degree programmes demand. Although no particular diet of historical knowledge is prescribed, programmes need to impart such knowledge and also to encourage students to acquire more. The learning outcomes of a history degree programme have to be seen in terms of particular pieces of student work - either written

or spoken - in which crucial tests are understanding texts and marshalling an argument. Accordingly, the ability to deploy ideas and information, to show conceptual grasp and to shape argument becomes difficult to separate in assessment practice from the ability to display appropriately relevant, wide and diverse historical knowledge.

2.11 Given the ongoing development of the European Higher Education Area the transparency of standards is becoming increasingly important both within the national and transnational contexts. The development of *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* within the Bologna process has emphasised the need for both coherent programme structures of appropriate length for the articulation of transparent and comprehensible learning outcomes. This 'outcomes and competences' approach has been adopted by the European Commission-funded Tuning Project. Subject profiles, which include history, are intended as common reference points within the European field of higher education and provide an outline summary for first and second cycle degrees (for further details and explanation of terminology, see <http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu>). The articulation of these common reference points should be seen as consistent with, and are not intended to subsume, UK subject benchmark statements.

### **3 The historian's skills and qualities of mind**

3.1 It is recommended that history degree students should undertake programmes which foster and inculcate the following skills and qualities.

- The ability to understand how people have existed, acted and thought in the always different context of the past. History often involves encountering and sensing the past's otherness and of learning to understand unfamiliar structures, cultures and belief systems. These forms of understanding also shed important light on the influence which the past has on the present.
- The ability to read and analyse texts and other primary sources, both critically and empathetically, while addressing questions of genre, content, perspective and purpose. Primary sources include visual and material sources like topographical evidence, paintings, coins, medals, cartoons, photographs and films.
- The appreciation of the complexity and diversity of situations, events and past mentalities. This emphasis is central to history's character as an anti-reductionist discipline fostering intellectual maturity.
- The understanding of the problems inherent in the historical record itself: awareness of a range of viewpoints and the way to cope with this; appreciation of the range of problems involved in the interpretation of complex, ambiguous, conflicting and often incomplete material; a feeling for the limitations of knowledge and the dangers of simplistic explanations.
- Basic critical skills: a recognition that statements are not all of equal validity, that there are ways of testing them, and that historians operate by rules of evidence which, though themselves subject to critical evaluation, are also a component of intellectual integrity and maturity.

- Intellectual independence: a history programme is not simply or even primarily a preparation for research in the subject, but it should incorporate the general skills of the researcher, namely the ability to set tasks and solve problems. This involves: bibliographic skills; the ability to gather, sift, select, organise and synthesise large quantities of evidence; the ability to formulate appropriate questions and to provide answers to them using valid and relevant evidence and argument. It should develop reflexivity, ie an understanding of the nature of the discipline including what questions are asked by historians, and why.
- Marshalling of argument: in written and oral form drawing on and presenting all the above skills. Such argument should have structure; it should be relevant and concise. In the case of written argument it should be expressed in clear, lucid and coherent prose. Orally, it should involve the capacity to sustain a reasoned line of argument in the face of others, to listen, to engage in sustained debate, and amend views as necessary in the light of evidence and argument. It is, of course, recognised that some forms of distance-learning will make it difficult for students to engage in face-to-face discussion or to make oral presentations to a group. Where this is the case, the institution should explain how any such reductions in opportunity for the marshalling of argument are compensated for.

3.2 Some programmes, for example economic and social history, incorporate the methodologies of other humanities and social science disciplines. A number of specific skills are thus essential to particular types of programme, and desirable though not obligatory in others. Departments or institutions are strongly recommended to make provision, where appropriate, for the development of at least one of these: visual and material culture; languages; the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in learning or analysis; numeracy and quantitative methods; archaeological fieldwork; archival study; or skills associated with the study of other disciplines with which history has close links. Fieldwork and field trips may play an integral role within a history course or programme. Also, the capacity of overseas exchanges or study-abroad programmes to enrich students' intellectual and personal development is noted.

3.3 The generic skills acquired through the study of history are:

- self-discipline
- self-direction
- independence of mind, and initiative
- ability to work with others, and have respect for others' reasoned views
- ability to gather, organise and deploy evidence, data and information; and familiarity with appropriate means of identifying, finding, retrieving, sorting and exchanging information
- analytical ability, and the capacity to consider and solve problems, including complex problems to which there is no single solution
- structure, coherence, clarity and fluency of oral expression
- structure, coherence, clarity and fluency of written expression
- intellectual integrity and maturity
- imaginative insight and creativity.

## **4 Criteria for content and approach in designing a programme of undergraduate study**

4.1 History provision across the sector is characterised by a diversity of periods, cultures, methodologies and conceptual assumptions. Nevertheless a number of central requirements can be specified. These requirements do not point to a particular combination of courses or a particular programme structure.

4.2 **Time depth:** awareness of continuity and change over an extended time span is central to an historical awareness. It leads to an understanding of historical process, and it opens the way to the insights which stem from a juxtaposition of past and present. Programmes should introduce students to the issues of continuity and change and give them experience of the intellectual benefits accruing from the study of history over an extended period. Programmes which cover a relatively short time span should demonstrate how they provide students with a long-term perspective on their subject matter.

4.3 **Geographical range:** for good reasons it has become widely accepted within the history community that students should study the history of more than one society, culture or state. Among other benefits, this opens the way to appreciation and understanding of comparative perspectives. Where a single country is the predominant focus of the programme, that programme should incorporate serious and sustained comparison with others. The student whose prime interest lies in the UK is in no way exempt from this requirement. The possibilities of enhanced objectivity which flow from studying other countries are particularly important, as are the implications of Britain's imperial past and of its increasing ethnic, social and cultural diversity in the recent past and the present. History's ability to promote understanding between cultures and national traditions and the opportunities it affords to explore national traditions, citizenship issues and a range of national identities remain distinctively important features deriving from the study of the discipline.

4.4 **Contemporary sources:** opportunity for close work on source material originating in the period studied is essential. This will often comprise written documents, but when appropriate will include artefacts, visual evidence etc. Students should carry out intensive critical work on such source material. This may take place in a 'special subject' course, in other courses or in independent work. In many instances the work done by students approximates to historical research. While most students do not expect a career in research, documentary work is, nevertheless, regarded as a necessary part of learning some of the characteristics of the discipline.

4.5 **Critical awareness:** all history students should be expected to reflect critically on the nature of their discipline, its social rationale, its theoretical underpinnings and its intellectual standing. While this may take place in a course whose predominant focus is on historiography or on historical method, history students should be expected to demonstrate wider historiographical and methodological awareness and understanding in all courses they undertake and also in independent extended pieces of written work.

4.6 **Diversity of specialisms:** history comprises many varieties, each with its distinctive focus and theoretical orientation (for instance, economic, social, political, cultural, environmental history, the history of women, and gender). Students should be introduced to some of these varieties of approach and critically engage with the

concepts and methodologies of other disciplines where appropriate. The aim is not comprehensiveness, but a critical awareness that there are many principles of selection and modes of enquiry. Where a programme is strongly based on one variety, serious comparisons must be made with the contribution of others to historical understanding.

4.7 **An extended piece of written work:** this allows the student to formulate, execute and complete an independent extended piece of written work under appropriate supervision. In most cases this will be based on contemporary source materials. Alternatively it may take the form of an in-depth historiographical enquiry, as in the critical evaluation of a particular historical controversy, or a particular historian's oeuvre. It may be free-standing, or it may arise from - and be linked to - a taught course.

## **5 Progression**

5.1 Students progress through history degree programmes largely by gaining experience and knowledge as they take successive courses over a period normally of three to four years. It is a cumulative process of 'learning by doing'. Subject matter varies, and courses may make heavier and/or more sophisticated demands on students over time, but the general process is one of developing and reinforcing similar skills and qualities throughout the programme. Qualitative advances may be achieved in a number of ways, for instance through increasing conceptual sophistication, increasing interpretative skill, increasing capacity for sustained written and/or oral analysis, greater independence of learning, and so on. Departments are not therefore expected to conform to any one model, but they should show how their particular programmes are designed to provide students with the means to gain in insight, competence and performance over three to four years. Some programmes may in effect give students nine terms (or six semesters) of doing the same kind of thing with a variety of subject matter but with a growing competence. Others may attach particular skills and attributes to particular courses and prescribe how students shall move through them. Whatever the structure of the programme, students will be expected to achieve higher standards at the end of their degree studies than at the beginning. Because history is a non-sequential discipline, there is no fixed order of progression from one type of course to another. There is no reason in principle why, for example, courses covering a broad chronological or geographical range should be more strongly represented in year one than later in the programme, or that close documentary study of a narrow period be undertaken in the final year. However, it is the responsibility of departments clearly and explicitly to articulate how a given programme facilitates progression over the years of study.

## **6 Teaching, learning and assessment**

### **Teaching and learning**

6.1 Students should be provided with documentation for each individual course which explains what the course is designed to achieve, and the means to its attainment. Students should also be provided with an outline of the course structure, information about the nature and amount of assessment, intended learning outcomes and a bibliography. These course guides should be designed to be read by students in relation to departmental documentation which includes details of the degree scheme, criteria for all levels of classification and all forms of assessment in use, the range of available courses,

course structures, assessment methods and weightings, and advice about plagiarism. Both individual course and departmental documentation should make the teaching and learning available to students in as clear and straightforward a form as possible.

6.2 Programmes should offer students regular formal contact with tutors and other students in a variety of structured settings. The purpose of these engagements is to deepen their research, oral and communication skills. They should also inculcate the qualities of self-discipline, which are necessary for the successful pursuit of the discipline. The precise form and nature of these engagements within departments will, to some extent, be shaped by circumstances. But they will need to be the result of an internal planning process which determines and reviews the match between standard learning outcomes for the degree and the content and teaching/assessment methods employed in the department's individual courses and degree programmes. It is vital to note that teaching methods/learning opportunities should not be thought of as fixed categories. They must be kept under review by departments, with due consideration being given for instance to tutors' self-assessments, student course review questionnaires, and the dissemination of good practice from other departments and institutions.

6.3 There should be opportunities in the degree scheme for all students to experience lecture or lecture-type arrangements which capture their interest and excite their curiosity. Presentations by lecturers stamp the course or subject with the imprint of personality and enable students to reflect on and to respond to an individual's particular interpretative approach. Lectures provide a broad framework which helps define the course, while also introducing students to its main themes, debates and interpretations. At their best, they offer direct entry into a range of information and ideas which students may never, or only very rarely, be able to gather for themselves; they thus serve as a launching pad into the heart of new subject matter. They should enable the students to develop their skills in listening, selective note taking, and reflection. Lectures will be more appropriate to certain kinds of courses than to others and it is for course teams to decide on their optimum deployment. It is not suggested that they should be employed in all courses and also it is recognised that they may take many different forms, as in distance learning, and include the use of audio visual media and computer-aided learning etc.

6.4 Departments should also consider providing opportunities for all students to develop skills and abilities in the use of ICT as part of their historical studies. Such opportunities may be provided in various ways, as through virtual learning environments (VLEs), within particular history courses or modules, and at various stages of a degree programme. A wide range of abilities, say, from the critical use of internet resources and facilities, to the construction, analysis and management of complex historical databases, may then be developed through a well-managed process of progression. Learning history through ICT should therefore extend the depth and breadth of a student's knowledge and understanding of and about the discipline, as well as enhance their facility and confidence in the handling of new technologies. As in all other forms of history teaching and learning, ICT and VLE provision for history should be carefully designed with disciplinary goals in mind, and be fully supported by the appropriate teaching staff and other supporters of student learning.

6.5 There should be a requirement during the degree scheme for all students to have the opportunity to engage in seminars and forms of small group work (for distance learning degrees and programmes this may take the form of 'virtual' or e-seminars). In

these sessions students should be expected to participate in group discussion, give presentations and jointly explore themes and arguments. These group discussions should be aimed at improving students' understanding rather than at the acquisition of knowledge per se and should be structured in such a way as to maximise effective student participation. They will normally be preceded by a prescribed programme of reading. Such work should be seen as both deepening students' understanding of a theme or subject and developing oral communication skills. It encourages a critical, as well as self-critical but tolerant, approach to historical discussion and builds students' self-confidence. It improves their abilities to marshal historical evidence and to summarise historical arguments, as well as to think quickly on their feet, to communicate articulately and persuasively with others and to recognise the value of working closely with others.

6.6 Most of a history student's time is spent working independently, reading, thinking and writing. Course bibliographies and other reading advice will provide students with the necessary starting points, but they should be encouraged by tutors to make imaginative use of the library, the internet etc, to expand their knowledge base and their range of historical approaches. History is largely a text-based discipline which requires students to learn to read widely, rapidly and critically, to take good notes, to digest arguments and to synthesise information quickly and intelligently. It also requires them to construct arguments in writing.

6.7 Students should undertake a wide range of assignments. These might include seminar and group presentations, reports, reviews, gobbits or document papers, essays of varying lengths, ICT projects and dissertations. Some departments may wish to provide some students with opportunities and activities that enable them to explore the ways in which historical knowledge and skills can be applied and developed through various kinds of community, professionally-orientated or commercially-based student projects, fieldwork and placements. Such opportunities may be concerned with developing students' understanding of the value and uses of history in the public domain, with enhancing students' abilities to relate and transfer their disciplinary knowledge and skills to questions and challenges in the public sphere, or, more generally, with promotion of students' employability beyond their academic studies.

6.8 In providing such opportunities, departments should ensure that the activities envisaged are consistent with the overall goals of the history programme, and are well supported and fully documented, including, where appropriate: information about course requirements, responsibilities and requirements; intended learning outcomes; supervision arrangements; and assessment strategies and standards. It should be explained to students how such assignments enable them to improve their writing and oral communication skills, as well as those of evidence-handling, the critical treatment of themes/historical arguments and the thoughtful, persuasive presentation of their work. Assignments should be appropriate to the aims and intended outcomes of the course, though equity in the treatment of students and a balanced range of assessment across the whole programme must remain important considerations. The view that all courses should necessarily be of one term/semester duration is not supported. Certain types of historical course have been most effectively taught on a year-long basis. Where academic judgement indicates this to be desirable, this model should continue to be followed.

6.9 All students should receive critical and constructive comment on their progress as an integral part of teaching and learning. There should be adequate discussion of, and response to, a student's individual work. As a basic minimum, all tutors should specify in

writing a period or periods each week while a given course is being taught when they will be available for academic consultation. Individual encounters with tutors, whether as part of a regular teaching arrangement, feedback on written work or more occasional meetings, are essential to helping students clarify areas of confusion and gain a better understanding of their own performance as well as of historical themes and issues.

6.10 Staff and students should be made aware of the wide variety of guidance and advice on learning approaches and teaching resources which are available from the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology ([www.hca.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.hca.heacademy.ac.uk)).

## **Assessment**

6.11 Diversity in assessment is vital for two main reasons. First, the full range of a student's abilities is most unlikely to be revealed through any single mode. Second, the increasingly diverse educational background and formal qualifications presented on entry suggest that the degree programme should afford all students the opportunity to show what they know, understand and can do.

6.12 Assessment of undergraduate performance is diverse. However, the essay remains a central component. The essay is a piece of written work in response to a particular question or issue, done either under examination conditions or as coursework. Essays require students to demonstrate a number of skills in combination. Because of the integrative high-order skills which they develop, they are an essential element of all history assessment at this level. It is recommended that all departments should give serious consideration to the provision of opportunity for single-honours students to be assessed by essays of various types (as, for example, 'long' essays reflecting depth of scholarship; 'short' essays requiring precision of focus; essays focusing on different historical concepts - change, cause, similarity and difference etc; essays written to a target length; and essays written to time). It is also recommended that departments give serious consideration to requiring students to write at least some essays under exam conditions which afford safeguards against plagiarism and the use of inappropriate outside assistance. This also gives students the opportunity to develop relevant life-skills such as the ability to produce coherent, reasoned and supported arguments under pressure.

6.13 It is recommended that all single honours students should be assessed in some way or another on their understanding of and their ability to handle primary source material.

6.14 It is recommended that all single honours history students should be assessed on their ability to address historical problems in depth. Students should have the chance to pursue a historical enquiry, sustaining and developing it through several stages. Such an exercise involves both task-setting and problem-solving. This should normally be done through an extended piece of written work, usually of at least twice the length required for standard coursework essays.

6.15 Departments should also consider whether single-honours students should be given the opportunity to have their critical and communication skills assessed in other forms. The development of oral communication skills is important in the process of educating a historian and students should, where practicable, have opportunity to be assessed on this skill. Oral presentations can be of different types including, for example: formal paper delivered to a group; general contribution to seminar discussion; chairing or otherwise leading seminar discussion; and response to contributions made by others.



6.16 All departments are recommended to give serious consideration to ensuring that single honours students also have the opportunity to have their critical and communication skills assessed in some of the following ways:

- team working and collaborative activity: group projects, fact-finding, evidence-processing work, etc
- shorter written tasks, including historical literature reviews and reports
- use of information technology to answer questions about historical data, including statistical and/or graphical analysis of historical data sets and to present findings in a variety of appropriate forms (bar graphs, pie charts, etc)
- use of information technology for bibliographic and archive searches
- practical experience in the use of archival material.

6.17 It was not the intention of the benchmarking group for history to prescribe any one assessment strategy. Establishing criteria for classification is the business of departments and institutions. Different modes and weightings of assessment will be appropriate to different schemes of study, and will reflect the particular emphases and concentrations in those programmes. In order properly to evaluate the range of undergraduate study, an honours degree in history should be awarded on the basis of more than one form of assessment.

## **7 Assessment criteria**

7.1 Departments should operate, and publish for their students, descriptors which characterise levels of performance characteristic of the following honours classifications: first, upper second, lower second, and third. This might take the form of a template setting out assessment criteria. Where different modes of assessment privilege different qualities (for example essay writing in examination conditions, extended essays, dissertations, oral competence) different templates may need to be produced. Such templates or their equivalent should be published in student handbooks.

7.2 Published criteria and grade descriptors should be available for all forms of assessment. Criteria at all levels of classification should give predominance to positive achievement, making full use of the full range of marks set out in marking scheme. Feedback to students on performance should as appropriate indicate the kinds of improvements that would be necessary to achieve a higher mark. Assessment resources for history can be found on the website for the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology ([www.hca.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.hca.heacademy.ac.uk)).

7.3 Individual institutions might wish to develop new methods for describing undergraduate achievement. The basic threshold for achievement of honours, or H level, must remain the standard required to achieve a third class in traditional systems of classification. Describing performance above this level might be done through issuing transcripts rather than by classification. Institutions might issue transcripts containing assessment marks for all courses or modules and an overall percentage mark (which might be weighted). Such a procedure would discriminate more precisely between different candidates' performance and would enable institutions to show how a student performed across a range of assessments. Outstanding performance might be rewarded by graduating with distinction. Such a candidate would have achieved the same overall standard as a student graduating first class in a traditional system of classification.

7.4 An honours degree in history should normally reflect at least two years (or four semesters) of work beyond a previously qualifying standard. The qualifying standard would normally be one year's study at or equivalent to certificate level.

7.5 All graduates in history should demonstrate competence in the discipline and the purpose of schemes of assessment is to evaluate the level of competence achieved. In establishing and maintaining history degree programmes, departments should take into account the following summary of learning outcomes. They will not necessarily wish to include assessment of all these learning outcomes in degree classification:

- command of a substantial body of historical knowledge
- the ability to develop and sustain historical arguments in a variety of literary forms, formulating appropriate questions and utilising evidence (see paragraph 3.1)
- an ability to read, analyse and reflect critically and contextually upon contemporary texts and other primary sources, including visual and material sources like paintings, coins, medals, cartoons, photographs and films (see paragraphs 3.1, 4.4 and 6.13)
- an ability to read, analyse and reflect critically and contextually upon secondary evidence, including historical writings and the interpretations of historians (see paragraphs 3.1 and 4.5)
- an appreciation of the complexity of reconstructing the past, the problematic and varied nature of historical evidence (see paragraph 3.1)
- an understanding of the varieties of approaches to understanding, constructing, and interpreting the past; and, where relevant, a knowledge of concepts and theories derived from the humanities and social sciences (see paragraphs 2.4 and 4.6)
- the ability to gather and deploy evidence and data to find, retrieve, sort and exchange new information (see paragraphs 3.3 and 6.16)
- a command of comparative perspectives, which may include the ability to compare the histories of different countries, societies, or cultures (see paragraph 4.3)
- awareness of continuity and change over extended time spans (see paragraph 4.2)
- an understanding of the development of history as a discipline and the awareness of different historical methodologies (see paragraph 4.6)
- an ability to design, research, and present a sustained and independently-conceived piece of historical writing (see paragraphs 4.7 and 6.14)
- the ability to address historical problems in depth, involving the use of contemporary sources and advanced secondary literature (see paragraphs 4.4 and 6.14)
- clarity, fluency, and coherence in written expression (see paragraphs 3.1, 3.3, 6.6, 6.7, 6.12 and 6.16)
- clarity, fluency, and coherence in oral expression (see paragraphs 3.1, 3.3, 6.5, 6.7 and 6.15)
- the ability to work collaboratively and to participate in group discussion (see paragraphs 6.5 and 6.16)
- competence in specialist skills which are necessary for some areas of historical analysis and understanding, as appropriate (see paragraphs 3.2 and 6.16).

## **8 A statement on performance standards**

8.1 A student who has graduated with an excellent performance in single honours history can confidently be expected to have mastered a very extensive range and depth of historical knowledge in particular areas of the past and to have demonstrated a very superior command of nearly all the historical and transferable skills outlined above. The typical history graduate will have acquired a considerable range and depth of historical knowledge in particular areas of the past and will be able to show a very sound competence in nearly all of the historical and transferable skills outlined above. A student who has shown a weak command of historical knowledge and a limited understanding of the historical and transferable skills expected of an honours history graduate will not graduate with an honours degree and is likely to have failed to progress at an earlier stage in the single honours degree programme. Those students graduating in single honours history at the threshold level may well have demonstrated an unevenness of performance in the various courses or modules, and in the assessed work, in their degree programme. The unevenness may be detected by an examination of the range and diversity of marks awarded for their various courses or modules. Some students may perform consistently at the threshold level, but the majority who graduate at this level will have performed unevenly. They will have shown in parts of their degree programme levels of competence demonstrated by the typical student. At their best, they may have displayed sound historical knowledge and competence in many of the historical and transferable skills expected of an honours history graduate. Only a part of their performance is likely to have been assessed at the lowest threshold level. Even those students who have performed consistently at this level, however, will have demonstrated: a basic understanding of historical evidence of different types; the ability to produce structured, if underdeveloped and incomplete, arguments or to write a thorough narrative with insufficient analysis; the ability to express in a generally grammatical and intelligible manner, which may lack clarity and fluency.

## **9 Recommendations**

9.1 The benchmarking group for history recommended that all students studying history as part of their degree:

- undertake a programme which fosters the skills and qualities of mind listed in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.3 of this subject benchmark statement
- be provided with comprehensive course and department documentation
- be provided with opportunities to participate regularly in a variety of structured settings with tutors and other students
- receive good diagnostic feedback on their progress as an integral part of teaching.

9.2 The benchmarking group for history recommended that all single history honours students:

- follow a programme which gives them practical experience of the intellectual benefits occurring from studying the subject over an extended period of historical time
- study the history of more than one society or culture
- carry out intensive critical work on source materials generated by the period under study

- be expected to reflect critically on the nature of their discipline
- be introduced to some of the many varieties of history
- be involved in lecture or lecture-type arrangements which capture their interest and excite their curiosity
- engage in seminars and forms of group work
- undertake a wide range of assignments
- be assessed in a significant part on their essay-writing skills
- be assessed on their understanding of and ability to handle contemporary source material
- be assessed on their ability to address historical problems in depth.

9.3 The benchmarking group for history recommended that all departments should give serious consideration to requiring that all single history honours students will:

- formulate, execute and complete an independent extended piece of written work, with appropriate supervision on which they are assessed
- write at least some of their essays under exam conditions.

9.4 Departments will also wish to consider the desirability of providing the opportunity for all single honours students to be assessed on:

- varying types of and extended writing
- oral communication
- other forms of presentation.

## **10 Concluding remarks**

10.1 The subject benchmark statement has recognised that the historical content in the many single honours degree programmes on offer in the UK will vary in detail, although they are likely to share certain general characteristics. While the specific content of history degree programmes will undoubtedly vary, all will teach a substantial body of historical knowledge and all will develop the particular historical skills and the general transferable skills expected of an honours graduate in history. These historical skills will include an appreciation of the complexity and diversity of situations, events and mentalities in the past and of the surviving evidence about them; the ability to read, analyse and reflect critically and contextually upon, a wide range of source materials; an awareness of the varieties of approaches to understanding, constructing and interpreting the past; an understanding of history as a discipline and of different historical methodologies; an awareness of continuity and change over time; an ability to gather evidence to develop and sustain historical arguments; and the ability to marshal an argument and to express it with clarity, fluency and coherence. An honours history programme may expect students to employ other cognate skills in, for example, languages, computing and quantitative methods, and will certainly seek to develop such generic or transferable skills as self-discipline, self-direction, independence of mind, empathy and imaginative insight, and the ability to work with others and to have respect for the reasoned view of others.

## **Appendix A - Membership of the review group for the subject benchmark for history**

Professor David Bates	Institute of Historical Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London
Dr Alan Booth	University of Nottingham
Professor Barry Coward	Birkbeck College, University of London
Professor Martin Daunton	University of Cambridge
Professor Jackie Eales	Canterbury Christ Church University
Professor Eric Evans	Lancaster University
Professor Paul Hyland	Bath Spa University

## **Appendix B - Membership of the original benchmarking group for history**

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

Dr M Arnot

Professor D Bates                      University of Glasgow

Professor C Clark                      University of Warwick

Professor M Daunton                  Churchill College, University of Cambridge

Professor H Dickinson                University of Edinburgh

Dr Susan Doran                        St Mary's College, Twickenham

Professor W Doyle                    University of Bristol

Professor D Eastwood                University of Wales, Swansea

Professor E Evans                    University of Lancaster

Professor A Fletcher (Chair)

Professor A Jones                    University of Wales, Aberystwyth

Mr R Lloyd-Jones                    Sheffield Hallam University

Dr E McFarland                      Glasgow Caledonian University

Professor A Porter                    King's College London

Professor P Stafford                 University of Huddersfield

Professor J Tosh                      University of North London

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