

Health studies

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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**¹. In addition, some subject benchmark statements provide guidance on integrated master's awards.

Subject benchmark statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily, they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions (HEIs) when new programmes are being designed and developed in a subject area. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not a specification of a detailed curriculum in the subject.

Subject benchmark statements also provide support to HEIs in pursuit of internal quality assurance. They enable the learning outcomes specified for a particular programme to be reviewed and evaluated against agreed general expectations about standards. Subject benchmark statements allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design and can stimulate academic discussion and debate upon the content of new and existing programmes within an agreed overall framework. Their use in supporting programme design, delivery and review within HEIs is supportive of moves towards an emphasis on institutional responsibility for standards and quality.

Subject benchmark statements may also be of interest to prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a given subject or subject area.

The relationship between the standards set out in this document and those produced by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies for individual disciplines will be a matter for individual HEIs to consider in detail.

This subject benchmark statement represents a revised version of the original published in 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.

¹ This is equivalent to the honours degree in the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (level 10) and in the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales* (level 6).

The Disability Equality Duty (DED) came into force on 4 December 2006². The DED requires public authorities, including HEIs, to act proactively on disability equality issues. The Duty complements the individual rights focus of the *Disability Discrimination Act* 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 Equality and Human Rights Commission³ has published guidance⁴ 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 Infrastructure⁵, 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 *Code of Practice (revised) for providers of post-16 education and related services*⁶, and also through the Equality Challenge Unit⁷ which is established to promote equality and diversity in higher education.

² In England, Scotland and Wales.

³ On 1 October 2007, the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission merged into the new Equality and Human Rights Commission.

⁴ 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 and higher education institutions in England, Scotland and Wales*, may be obtained from www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/forbusinessandorganisation/publicauthorities/disabilityequalityd/pages/disabilitye.aspx

⁵ An explanation of the Academic Infrastructure, and the roles of subject benchmark statements within it, is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure

⁶ Copies of the *Code of Practice (revised) for providers of post-16 education and related services*, published by the Disability Rights Commission, may be obtained from www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publicationsandresources/Disability/Pages/Education.aspx

⁷ Equality Challenge Unit, www.ecu.ac.uk

Foreword

This subject benchmark statement is a revision of the original, published by QAA, in 2002. In drafting this revision, the review group discussed whether health studies continues to be an appropriate title, and decided on balance it did reflect the non-applied nature of current programmes and its multidisciplinary focus. In response to the changing discourses in the study of health and its meaning, and the more salutogenic approaches to health, the term 'health and well-being' has been added to the benchmark statement.

The review group agreed that the academic disciplines primarily informing a health studies curriculum should be defined in the revised benchmark statement while retaining the flexibility that affords each programme the right to choose an explicit focus.

The review group was aware of ongoing debates of the place of health promotion and public health programmes, and the tension in keeping the benchmark statement broad enough to allow both to draw from the statement. The revised statement also recognises the important contribution of a number of stakeholders in the planning, delivery and evaluation of programmes including employers, service users, students and others.

The review group also considered the global context in which health is contextualised and the impact of sustainability issues on health and well-being.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Health studies is a subject that considers the great diversity of human experience of health, well-being and illness. It does so from a wide variety of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives. It critically examines health and illness discourse and seeks to analyse evidence about health, well-being and illness in a wide range of contexts and perspectives. It considers local, national, European and global issues and may compare the experiences of individuals, groups, communities, cultures and nations. It seeks to add to this evidence through research activity of many different kinds. Because of this potentially wide scope of the subject, individual programmes will differ in their particular concerns and emphases.

1.2 Within the discipline of health studies, many different degree titles may therefore be found. These include health, health studies, health and well-being and health sciences as well as more specific titles such as health promotion and public health, and health and community development. Each award will have its own characteristic focus on the range of issues referred to above. All programmes will undertake a critical examination of contrasting perspectives and provide insight into the human experience of health, well-being and illness. This benchmark statement may be also used in conjunction with others when designing or reviewing multidisciplinary or joint programmes.

2 Nature and scope of health studies

2.1 The word 'health' has connotations of wholeness and well-being, of happiness and contentment, of equity and justice, of a positive state that goes beyond freedom from disease or deprivation. It may indicate such a state within an individual, a family, a community or extend to the condition of the planet as a whole. There is no universally agreed definition of health. Despite the complexities of definition and the differences of opinion, there is agreement that the study of health is not the same thing as the study of illness or of training in the care of the sick. Rather, health studies as a discipline seeks to examine all those factors which have the potential to influence health and well-being. Thus the experience of illness, distress or care may be included within a health studies programme but the programme will not be confined to the study of such experiences.

2.2 A welcome consequence of the diversity of range and focus outlined above is that the scope of health studies is vast. However, it is possible to identify a number of common themes at the heart of the subject:

- the exploration of health as a human experience mediated by individual, societal and global contexts
- a reflexive and critical evaluation of factors affecting health and its representations
- an ability to engage actively in the discourses surrounding the concept of health and its representations.

2.3 Health studies should be informed by other academic disciplines. These should include the following to a greater or lesser extent:

- social sciences
- sociology
- social policy
- psychology
- politics
- economics
- philosophy
- ethics
- law
- physiology
- epidemiology
- geography
- anthropology.

2.4 The challenge then for each particular course will be to make explicit the nature of its focus. Health studies students will thus graduate with a portfolio of employability skills whether from traditional or vocationally-focused courses.

2.5 Some degree programmes select a particular combination of subject disciplines upon which to base their programmes and provide a rationale for that choice. One central element in this choice will be the context in which health is located. For example, health can be examined as a human capacity determined by a range of social, political, economic and organisational factors. It is the breadth of evidence and analysis which is used to distinguish health studies from the application of any particular subject discipline to health.

2.6 Some programmes will have a specific focus set by the demands of the particular vocational outcomes towards which they are directed. However, a suitable breadth of study should be undertaken so that the sense of the multifaceted and complex nature of health may be captured.

2.7 Irrespective of such distinctions of focus, any health studies degree should be based upon a sound research base, and recognition should be given to the need to consider diverse and innovative approaches to methodologies. Within this context, the development of critical reflection is essential as it enables the skills of analysis and synthesis to develop. Such skills provide a foundation from which to move beyond problem-solving into an exploration of the possibilities for the enhancement of health status.

2.8 It is envisaged that in the process of planning, development, delivery and evaluation of programmes, relevant stakeholders such as students, service-users and employers would be involved.

3 Subject knowledge and understanding

3.1 The single honours health studies graduate will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

- health as a contested concept
- the multidisciplinary nature of health studies
- the central place of research activity in the development of the subject
- the diverse determinants of health and well-being
- the contemporary issues at the forefront of the subject
- the range of theories of causality relating to health
- social policy approaches and potential influence upon health and well-being
- the theoretical and professional rationales concerning health interventions
- the role of individual differences in affecting health status
- the diversity of the experience of health and well-being
- the diversity of values associated with health and well-being
- comparisons within and between healthcare systems and modes of delivery
- cultural diversity within health and well-being
- the central theoretical arguments and paradigms in health research
- the use and application of information technology to communication and analysis within the discipline.

4 Subject-specific skills and transferable skills

4.1 The nature of health studies entails interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. A health studies student will develop the skills necessary for the assimilation and understanding of the complex and diverse nature of the subject, as well as more general skills which will be widely transferable.

Subject-specific skills

4.2 A health studies graduate should be able to:

- compare between a range of health contexts, such as between individual and institutional contexts, or between national, international and global contexts
- analyse health and health issues, alongside health information and data that may be drawn from a wide range of disciplines
- synthesise coherent arguments from a range of contesting theories relating to health and health issues
- draw upon the lived experience of health, well-being and illness
- critically reflect on the links between individual experience of health and health issues and the wider structural elements relevant to health and well-being
- articulate central theoretical arguments within a variety of health contexts
- draw on research and research methodologies to locate, review and evaluate research findings relevant to health and health issues, across a range of disciplines.

4.3 In addition to these subject-specific skills, the health studies graduate will have developed many other skills related to the successful completion of a degree programme, and which are relevant and transferable in terms of the graduate's successful career management.

Transferable skills

4.4 A health studies graduate will have the ability to:

- communicate with others in a clear and articulate manner, both verbally and in writing
- use appropriate academic conventions in the production and presentation of work
- present ideas and arguments in a well-structured and coherent manner in a variety of formats
- work with others in groups, taking responsibility for an agreed area of a shared activity
- negotiate formally and informally as appropriate
- identify and propose solutions to problems, both in relation to the substantive area of health studies and to other educational and social issues
- develop an appreciation of how organisations and businesses within the sector operate and consider the relevance of national employability skills criteria
- carry out tasks independently
- recognise issues relating to equal opportunities and diversity, and identify appropriate courses of action in relation to such issues
- gather and evaluate relevant information from a wide variety of sources using appropriate manual and electronic systems
- use information and communication technology to store, retrieve and produce material, including the use of word-processing, databases, spreadsheets and other applications as appropriate to the task
- reflect on and review progress in their own studies, and seek assistance or guidance as appropriate in order to enhance their own personal development planning.

5 Teaching, learning and assessment

5.1 The teaching, learning and assessment strategies selected in health studies programmes will enable the development of reflective and critical approaches to the study of health and well-being. These strategies will reflect the contested and multidimensional nature of health studies and facilitate active student participation in recognition of the essential contribution that students bring to the learning and teaching process.

5.2 Learning outcomes will provide transparent guidelines for student learning and the criteria for student achievement will be made explicit. Opportunities should be provided to enable students to:

- locate, select and evaluate appropriate resource materials
- critically analyse and evaluate health and its representations
- construct coherent arguments from a range of contested perspectives
- communicate effectively in a variety of modes
- develop independence in learning
- formulate questions, initiate, and carry out health-related projects
- make judgements and use a range of approaches in problem solving
- take responsibility for their personal development and lifelong learning needs.

5.3 A wide range of teaching and learning strategies should provide opportunities for progressive acquisition of subject-specific knowledge, understanding and skills, as well as wider transferable skills. The teaching and learning strategies should be clearly specified within the programme of study. Some or all of the following may be appropriate:

- small group discussion
- seminars, tutorials and practicals
- group work
- self-directed learning
- projects
- work-based learning
- lectures
- technology-enhanced learning
- presentations
- simulations
- workshops
- context-based learning.

5.4 This list is not meant to be prescriptive or limiting, and other methodologies may be appropriate for different groups of students.

5.5 Assessment strategies should reflect the learning outcomes and should make a positive contribution to the student's learning experience. Assessment can be both formative and summative. Feedback on all assessment activities is essential for student development and progression. Methods of assessment should reflect progression within the programme of study, focus on both knowledge and skills, and enable students to demonstrate their level of attainment of subject-specific and generic knowledge, understanding and skills. The use of diverse assessment strategies should meet the varied needs of students and should provide the opportunity to incorporate innovative and original approaches. The assessment strategies adopted should include some or all of the following:

- a range of oral and written presentations, such as seminar presentations and essays
- examinations, whether seen, unseen or open book
- case-studies
- peer assessment
- reflective diaries, critiques or portfolios
- practical-based, project-based or work experience reports
- computer-based assessments
- dissertations and independent study.

6 Benchmark standards

6.1 On completion of a single honours degree in health studies, graduates should be able to demonstrate the threshold level of performance. A typical graduate should be capable of more. A note at the end refers to the excellent graduate.

Subject-specific knowledge and skills

6.2 On completion of a single honours degree in health studies, graduates should be able to do the following at threshold and typical levels of performance.

Threshold level	Typical level
Demonstrate a sound knowledge base in selected subject areas that inform health and well-being.	Demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge base in selected subject areas that inform health and well-being.
Demonstrate a good grasp of the scope and breadth of the discipline.	Demonstrate a comprehensive grasp of the scope and breadth of the discipline.
Show a critical ability to analyse health as a contested concept.	Critically analyse the contested nature of health using a wide range of perspectives.
Demonstrate a good understanding of the multidisciplinary nature of health studies.	Use knowledge of the multidisciplinary nature of health studies to analyse health and health issues.

Show a critical awareness of the role of research in the development of health studies as a discipline.	Use research findings in a critical and evaluative way to demonstrate the development of health studies as a discipline.
Show an understanding of the diversity and changing nature of determinants of health.	Show a critical understanding of the diversity and changing nature of determinants of health and the controversies that attend them.
Demonstrate an insight into contemporary issues at the forefront of health and well-being.	Critically analyse contemporary issues at the forefront of health and well-being.
Demonstrate a critical understanding of some theories of causality relating to health and ill-health.	Critically analyse a range of theories of causality relating to health and ill-health.
Critique some professional rationales concerning health interventions.	Critically appraise a number of theoretical and professional rationales concerning health interventions.
Understand and evaluate the role of the individual and of institutions in affecting health status.	Critically evaluate the role of the individual and of institutions in affecting health status.
Indicate the diversity of experience and values associated with health.	Critically analyse the diversity of experience and values associated with health.
Compare and contrast different healthcare systems.	Critically analyse different healthcare systems.
Articulate and apply a number of central theoretical arguments within health studies.	Critically reflect and evaluate on a range of theoretical arguments within health studies.
Locate, review, evaluate, carry out, report, and analyse research in health studies.	Apply an appropriate critical framework to use and evaluate research in health studies.
Cross traditional subject boundaries drawing on appropriate knowledge from other academic disciplines to elucidate health issues.	Cross traditional subject boundaries drawing on appropriate knowledge from other academic disciplines to reflect critically on health issues.
Analyse health and health issues from several appropriate critical perspectives.	Demonstrate an appreciation of utilising an integrated approach to an analysis of health and health issues.
Identify current issues and discourses in contemporary health research and debate.	Develop an analysis and evaluation of contemporary issues and discourses in health research and debate.

General transferable skills

6.3 On completion of a single honours degree in health studies, graduates should be able to do the following at threshold and typical levels of performance.

Threshold level	Typical level
Articulate opinions and formulate arguments effectively in speech and writing.	Use enhanced language skills to articulate opinions and formulate arguments effectively in speech and writing.
Learn independently and utilise some problem-solving skills.	Learn independently, monitor and evaluate own personal development planning needs, and identify appropriate problem-solving strategies.
Collaborate and plan as a team member and contribute to the work of a team.	Contribute proactively to the aims and organisation of a team.
Use information and communications technology competently and effectively in a range of applications to include information gathering and retrieval.	Use information and communications technology to enhance verbal and written presentations, and to facilitate relevant information retrieval.
Demonstrate competence in skills transferable to the workplace.	Demonstrate self-awareness and confidence in skills transferable to the workplace and the ability to articulate these to a particular employer.
Demonstrate an awareness of equal opportunities and diversity issues in context.	Appropriately respond to equal opportunities and diversity issues in context.

6.4 The excellent graduate, in addition to the above, will demonstrate flair, creativity, independence of thought, advanced critical and analytical ability, innovation, and a capacity to critique and integrate conventional approaches to the discipline. They will be able to act autonomously, demonstrate initiative, and demonstrate advanced problem-solving abilities.

Appendix A: Membership of the review group for the subject benchmark statement for health studies

Helen Bulpitt	Health Sciences and Practice Subject Centre, Higher Education Academy
Susan Cuthbert	University of Worcester
Stella Jones-Devitt (Chair)	Subject centre subject adviser for health studies, York St John University
Mary Larkin	De Montfort University
Lynda Stobert	Birmingham City University
Marion Thompson	Birmingham City University

Appendix B: Membership of the original benchmarking group for health studies

Details provided below are as published in the original subject benchmark statement for health studies (2002).

Professor Elizabeth Alder	Napier University, Edinburgh
David Balsamo	Chester College
Dr Stuart Brand	University of Central England in Birmingham
Susan Cuthbert	University College Worcester
Lee-Ann Fenge	Bournemouth University
Carol Hodgkinson	The Nottingham Trent University
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Dr Mike Money (Chair)	Liverpool John Moores University
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