



Subject Benchmark Statement

Area Studies: Draft for consultation

February 2016

Contents

How can I use this document?	1
About Subject Benchmark Statements	2
About this Subject Benchmark Statement	4
1 Introduction	5
2 Nature and extent of Area Studies	7
3 Subject knowledge and understanding.....	8
4 Subject-specific and generic skills.....	9
5 Teaching, learning and assessment.....	10
6 Benchmark standards	12
Appendix 1: Indicative list of degree programme titles in Area Studies.....	13
Appendix 2: Membership of the benchmarking and review groups for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Area Studies	14

How can I use this document?

This document is a Subject Benchmark Statement for Area Studies that defines what can be expected of a graduate in the subject, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies.

You may want to read this document if you are:

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

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Subject Benchmark Statement can be found in the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) glossary.¹

¹ The QAA glossary is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary.

About Subject Benchmark Statements

Subject Benchmark Statements form part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) which sets out the expectations that all providers of UK higher education reviewed by QAA are required to meet.² They are a component of Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, which includes the expectation that higher education providers 'consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements' in order to secure threshold academic standards.³

Subject Benchmark Statements describe the nature of study and the academic standards expected of graduates in specific subject areas, and in respect of particular qualifications. They provide a picture of what graduates in a particular subject might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their programme of study.

Subject Benchmark Statements are used as reference points in the design, delivery and review of academic programmes. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not intended to represent a national curriculum in a subject or to prescribe set approaches to teaching, learning or assessment. Instead, they allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design within a framework agreed by the subject community. Further guidance about programme design, development and approval, learning and teaching, assessment of students, and programme monitoring and review is available in Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality of the Quality Code in the following Chapters:⁴

- *Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval*
- *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*
- *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*
- *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review.*

For some subject areas, higher education providers may need to consider other reference points in addition to the Subject Benchmark Statement in designing, delivering and reviewing programmes. These may include requirements set out by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, national occupational standards and industry or employer expectations. In such cases, the Subject Benchmark Statement may provide additional guidance around academic standards not covered by these requirements.⁵ The relationship between academic and professional or regulatory requirements is made clear within individual statements, but it is the responsibility of individual higher education providers to decide how they use this information. The responsibility for academic standards remains with the higher education provider who awards the degree.

Subject Benchmark Statements are written and maintained by subject specialists drawn from and acting on behalf of the subject community. The process is facilitated by QAA. In order to ensure the continuing currency of Subject Benchmark Statements, QAA initiates regular reviews of their content, five years after first publication, and every seven years subsequently.

² The Quality Code, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code, aligns with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, available at: www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ESG_endorsed-with-changed-foreword.pdf.

³ Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a.

⁴ Individual Chapters are available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b.

⁵ See further Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a.

Relationship to legislation

Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them, for example by funding bodies. The Quality Code does not interpret legislation nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Subject Benchmark Statement where appropriate. Higher education providers are responsible for how they use these resources.⁶

Equality and diversity

The Quality Code embeds consideration of equality and diversity matters throughout. Promoting equality involves treating everyone with equal dignity and worth, while also raising aspirations and supporting achievement for people with diverse requirements, entitlements and backgrounds. An inclusive environment for learning anticipates the varied requirements of learners, and aims to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Higher education providers, staff and students all have a role in, and a responsibility for, promoting equality.

Equality of opportunity involves enabling access for people who have differing individual requirements as well as eliminating arbitrary and unnecessary barriers to learning. In addition, disabled students and non-disabled students are offered learning opportunities that are equally accessible to them, by means of inclusive design wherever possible and by means of reasonable individual adjustments wherever necessary.

⁶ See further the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: General Introduction*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=181.

About this Subject Benchmark Statement

This Subject Benchmark Statement refers to bachelor's degrees with honours in Area Studies.⁷

This version of the statement forms its third edition, following initial publication in 2002 and review and revision in 2008.⁸

Note on alignment with higher education sector coding systems

Programmes of study that use this Subject Benchmark Statement as a reference point are generally classified under the following codes in the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS).⁹

- R (European languages, literature and related subjects)
- T (Eastern, Asiatic, African, American and Australasian languages, literature and related subjects).

Summary of changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement (2008)

The review group agreed that the Subject Benchmark Statement for Area Studies remained broadly fit for purpose and that only minor changes were required. These reflect developments in the subject area and in global politics and society more widely. The growing role of technology has led to changes in teaching approaches, but has also enabled students to access a greater range of materials related to the area or region(s) of study. This in turn can be set against the increased challenge in finding suitable locations for students to undertake a period of study abroad in regions that may be subject to instability.

⁷ Bachelor's degrees are at level 6 in *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and level 10 in *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland*, as published in *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/qualifications.

⁸ Further information is available in the *Recognition scheme for Subject Benchmark Statements*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=190.

⁹ Further information about JACS is available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1776/649.

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 areas of the world. UK higher education providers offer a wide range of programmes in which a variety of disciplinary approaches are employed. Students thereby gain in-depth understanding of the culture, politics and society 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 necessarily 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 well positioned to react to emerging and challenging areas of study. Within the Area Studies framework, UK higher education providers 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 higher education providers is maintained by a high level 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 degree programmes in Area Studies.

1.5 Area Studies programmes are 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 element where it forms part of a degree programme.

1.6 The multi and 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 subject boundaries in innovative ways, with both established and emerging methodologies. One key contribution of Area Studies has been, and continues to be, its unique perspective on the process of globalisation. Area Studies brings an in-depth regional perspective to the study of globalisation and transnationalism that other subject domains rarely manage to achieve. These are major strengths of the field of Area Studies.

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 achievement of a bachelor's degree with honours 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 transnational links 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 from working between local and global contexts, along with language and other skills, and often with 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 also to the Subject Benchmark Statement for Languages, Cultures and Societies.

1.9 Graduates in Area Studies are well placed to enter an ever more transnational job market. Area Studies programmes encourage students to develop a strong sense of perspective and flexibility in thinking, and 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 levels.

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

2 Nature and extent 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 society and culture of an area, using whichever disciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches are most appropriate to understand the aspects of the area on which they concentrate. Comparative analysis or understanding may 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 generally 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 may be conceptualised in two ways: the degree of methodological and conceptual coherence deriving from the understanding and application of different disciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches, or 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. The diversity of programmes in terms of breadth of coverage and depth of focus remains one of the main strengths of Area Studies in the UK.

2.6 Area Studies programmes often 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 programme 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 not practically always possible, for honours degree programmes in Area Studies to include one or more periods spent in the region studied. These periods are generally an integral element of an Area Studies degree programme, and carry academic credit (where credit is used). The period varies from a week or two, to a semester, to an entire academic year according to the objectives of the individual programme. The period of residence abroad may involve formal study in an overseas higher education provider, research for a project, a placement and/or employment. Whatever the pattern, its intended value lies in students' direct exposure to a culture and society of the area they are studying. This enhances both their intercultural awareness and competences and their employability.

3 Subject knowledge and understanding

3.1 Since Area Studies is multi and interdisciplinary, the field covers a wide range of subject topics and methods of study. Characteristically, Area Studies programmes develop a broad and complementary range of knowledge and understanding. Programme documentation indicates 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 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 promote a knowledge and understanding of:

- the area/region(s) studied, either through several disciplines or through interdisciplinary approaches, including the dynamics of social change in the area/region(s) studied and its place within a world context
- the multifaceted nature of the subject area, its complex relationship to, and the key methods and concepts of, other disciplines and interdisciplinary formations
- relevant scholarship originating from both within and outside the area/region(s) studied
- 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 multi and interdisciplinary composition, Area Studies programmes provide one of the most productive learning environments for 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 degree student in Area Studies. In different programmes within the field, the manner of delivery and the emphasis on each of the following skills varies, in some cases considerably. Specific programmes offer opportunities to students to pursue their own routes and develop their own skills.

4.3 The subject-specific skills acquired on completion of an honours degree in Area Studies include:

- an ability to critically engage with the area studied from a number of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, which may include anthropology, archaeology, art history, cultural studies, development studies, economics, film and media studies, geography, history, international relations, 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 examining the area studied
- the ability to situate the area studied in the context of different processes of globalisation
- the ability to use research techniques to identify, record, read and critically analyse and interrogate a range of primary and secondary written and/or oral and/or visual sources, in their original language where appropriate, 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.

4.4 Honours degree programmes in Area Studies 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 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 and visually in a clear and effective manner, using information technologies 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 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 teaching, learning and assessment in Area Studies. One of the great strengths of Area Studies programmes lies in the opportunities that 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. Where programmes entail a significant component of language study or a period of residence abroad, teaching, learning and assessment methods reflect this, as described in the Subject Benchmark Statement for Languages, Cultures and Societies.

5.3 Students are introduced to the area they are studying within a coherent and appropriate framework as defined by the programme provider. Pedagogical techniques vary according to the focus of the individual programme. Some Area Studies courses have a contemporary flavour while others pay greater attention to historical perspectives. 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 reflect these differences. Programmes teach students about methods for locating and accessing information, as well as the critical and comparative use of it. Programmes may also use online tools and resources to provide access to materials and information from the region of study; this is especially important when studying areas of the world at a distance, in particular regions that may be difficult to access during a period of residence abroad.

5.4 Teaching and learning methods reflect broader practice within the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences that contribute to the programme. In some cases, the disciplines involved include wider sciences, such as Geography and Geology, where these enable students to develop an in-depth knowledge of an area. There is a combination of scheduled teaching activities and collaborative or individual independent study. Teaching activities include lectures, seminars, workshops, tutorials, individual supervision, and facilitated online activity. Independent study of primary and secondary texts and other materials is an integral part of student learning in Area Studies programmes. Students have opportunities to actively participate in discussions, debates, and other activities within taught sessions and possibly through facilitated online discussion. Pedagogic methods drawn from a variety of disciplines allow students to integrate knowledge and suitable disciplinary approaches in a focused study of a particular society or region.

5.5 Among the variety of assessment methods used, students are given extensive opportunities to demonstrate relevant knowledge and skills. They are also enabled to demonstrate their capacity to employ and/or integrate different subject approaches, area-based materials and information sources in constructive, thoughtful and critical ways. Where appropriate, attention is given to assessing skills in a language other than English relevant to the area studied. Assessment methods used go beyond the established criteria for the contributory disciplines in that students are 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.

5.6 Assessment types vary by programme, but may include:

- essays, written reports, policy-type briefs
- examinations in varying formats
- oral presentations
- individual or group projects with outputs in oral or written forms
- independent research projects resulting in an extended essay or dissertation
- assessments focused on digital literacy such as the creation of websites, or carried out using blogs, wikis, or other tools
- tasks appropriate to assessing skills in a relevant language other than English.

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 a bachelor's degree with honours graduate. The standard achieved by the majority of honours graduates is defined as the typical standard. Graduates at both levels show knowledge and understanding of their area. Those at threshold level do so by basic presentation of information, evidence and argument. Graduates at typical level show abilities to evaluate information independently, to assess evidence critically, and to develop argument individually.

Threshold level

6.2 On graduating with an honours degree in Area Studies, students should be able to:

- i demonstrate knowledge of the area, its history, culture and society, as defined by the programme provider
- ii demonstrate understanding of the area in its wider geographical context, through comparison with other geographical areas (including the entire globe), and with reference to transnational links connecting the area to other parts of the world
- iii demonstrate awareness of relevant vocabulary and of contributory disciplines and theories
- iv describe concepts from different disciplines and/or interdisciplinary approaches as a means of understanding the area under study
- v demonstrate awareness of a diverse range of relevant information and research resources
- vi where relevant, demonstrate 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 be able to:

- i critically analyse and demonstrate detailed knowledge of the area, its history, culture and society as defined by the programme provider
- ii demonstrate understanding of the area in its wider geographical context, through comparison with other geographical areas (including the entire globe), and with reference to transnational links connecting the area to other parts of the world
- iii 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
- iv describe, differentiate and compare concepts from different disciplines and/or interdisciplinary approaches as a means of understanding the area under study
- v demonstrate awareness of, and ability to use, evaluate and compare a diverse range of relevant information and research resources
- vi where relevant, demonstrate knowledge of a language as required by the degree programme concerned and apply these linguistic skills effectively at an appropriate level.

Appendix 1: 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 higher education providers.

- African studies
- American (US) studies
- Canadian studies
- Asia Pacific studies
- Celtic studies
- Chinese studies
- Development studies
- East Asian studies
- European studies
- Hispanic studies
- International studies
- Japanese studies
- Latin American studies
- Middle Eastern studies
- Oriental studies
- Scandinavian studies
- Slavonic studies
- South Asian studies
- Southeast Asian studies.

Appendix 2: Membership of the benchmarking and review groups for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Area Studies

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

Dr Lisa Bernasek	University of Southampton
Professor Tony Chafer	University of Portsmouth UK Council for Area Studies Associations (UKCASA)
Dr Sue Currell	University of Sussex British Association for American Studies (BAAS)
Professor Helen Drake	Loughborough University University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES)
Professor Jane Duckett	University of Glasgow British Association for Chinese Studies
Professor Rob Dunbar	University of Edinburgh
Dr Martin Evans	University of Chester African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUK)
Professor Robert Gleave (Co-Chair)	University of Exeter
Dr Susan Hodgett (Co-Chair)	Ulster University
Dr Rajesh Venogopal	London School of Economics British Association for South Asian Studies (BASAS)
Professor Ann White	University College, London
QAA Officer	
Harriet Barnes	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Area Studies (2008)

Details below appear as published in the revised benchmark statement.

Professor Tony Chafer	University of Portsmouth
Professor Philip Davies	De Montfort University and the British Library
Professor 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

Membership of the original benchmarking group for Area Studies (2002)

Details provided below are as published in the original subject benchmark statement.

Professor Janet Beer	The Manchester Metropolitan University
Professor George Blazycza	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

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