



# Subject Benchmark Statement

Philosophy

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## About this Statement

This QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy defines what can be expected of a graduate in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies. Subject Benchmark Statements are an established part of the quality assurance arrangements in UK higher education, but not a regulatory requirement. They are sector-owned reference points, developed and written by academics. Subject Benchmark Statements also describe the nature and characteristics of awards in a particular discipline or area. Subject Benchmark Statements are published in QAA's capacity as an expert quality body on behalf of the higher education sector. A summary of the Statement is also available on the QAA website.

Key changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement include:

- a revised structure for the Statement, which includes the introduction of cross-cutting themes of:
  - equity, diversity, and inclusion
  - accessibility and the needs of disabled students
  - education for sustainable development
  - employability, entrepreneurship and enterprise education
  - generative artificial intelligence
- a comprehensive review updating the context and purposes, including course design and content, in order to inform and underpin the revised benchmark standards.

## How can I use this document?

Subject Benchmark Statements are not intended to prescribe any particular approaches to teaching, learning or assessment. Rather, they provide a framework, agreed by the subject community, that forms the basis on which those responsible for curriculum design, approval and updating can reflect upon a course, and its component modules. This allows for flexibility and innovation in course design while providing a broadly accepted external reference point for that discipline.

They may also be used as a reference point by external examiners when considering whether the design of a course and the threshold standards of achievement are comparable with those of other higher education providers. Furthermore, Statements can support professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) with their definitions and interpretations of academic standards.

You may want to read this document if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of courses in Philosophy
- a prospective student thinking about undertaking a course in Philosophy
- an employer, to find out about the knowledge and skills generally expected of Philosophy graduates.

## Relationship to legislation

The responsibility for academic standards lies with the higher education provider which awards the degree. Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them by their relevant

funding and regulatory bodies. This Statement does not interpret legislation, nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements.

The status of the Statement will differ depending on the educational jurisdictions of the UK. In England, Subject Benchmark Statements are not [sector-recognised standards](#) as set out under the Office for Students' [regulatory framework](#). However, Subject Benchmark Statements are part of the current quality arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Because the Statement describes outcomes and attributes expected at the threshold standard of achievement in a UK-wide context, many higher education providers will use them as an enhancement tool for course design and approval, and for subsequent monitoring and review, in addition to helping demonstrate the security of academic standards.

## **Additional sector reference points**

Higher education providers are likely to consider other reference points in addition to this Statement when designing, delivering and reviewing courses. These may include requirements set out by PSRBs and industry or employer expectations. In 2024 QAA published an update to the [Quality Code](#), which will be helpful when using this Statement.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Subject Benchmark Statement can be found in [QAA's Glossary](#). Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Statement where appropriate.

# 1 Context and purposes of a Philosophy degree

1.1 Philosophy is concerned with how we can best make sense of the world, ourselves, and our relations to the world and each other. Because of this sense-making role, Philosophy can be seen as underpinning every other discipline. Since philosophical enquiry operates at a fundamental level, it often focuses on questions and topics that other fields take for granted without detailed examination. Philosophy is not only a discrete discipline but also part of all other forms of human knowledge, from biology to business studies, psychology to computer science, mathematics to politics, history to physics, and social justice to the law. Philosophy lies at the intersection of the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences.

## Purposes and characteristics

1.2 In a Philosophy degree, students will ask, and attempt to answer, the big questions about, for example, knowledge, value, existence, morality, social-political life, and intellectual inquiry itself. Central to Philosophy is its clarificatory role in helping people make intellectual sense of a problem through enhancing and encouraging thought and communication in ways that foster constructive dialogue.

1.3 Studying Philosophy provides many benefits, including the ability to:

- produce sophisticated analyses of ideas by rigorously identifying, explaining, and evaluating arguments, positions and views
- articulate new, thought-provoking arguments, positions and views
- engage attentively with the ideas of others, and make sense of their views in the context in which they are held
- cultivate advanced writing skills through the practices of reconstructing arguments from primary texts, presenting ideas in argument form, and engaging in reflective learning exercises
- develop proficiencies in reading texts
- make sense of complex philosophical ideas, and situate these in a wide range of social, cultural and political contexts
- use principles of formal and informal logic to make sense of arguments and positions
- grow as citizens and persons through reading, writing and discussing philosophical ideas
- cultivate advanced research skills through sourcing and consulting academic literature, producing research proposals and conducting literature reviews
- develop a more global cultural sensibility, by engaging with a range of philosophical perspectives
- bridge the sciences (natural and social) and the humanities
- apply philosophical knowledge, including to other disciplines
- communicate philosophical ideas to academic as well as non-academic audiences
- apply philosophical knowledge beyond academic domains, such as policy and governance.

1.4 A Philosophy degree also has broader social purposes, including to:

- encourage students to apply their knowledge to identify and confront real-world problems
- cultivate graduates with proficiencies in reading, writing, analysis, evaluation, communication and critical reflection
- provide students with the ability to guard against muddled and fallacious thinking through rigorous training in formal and informal logic
- provide a space for openly and critically engaging with difficult and challenging views through constructive dialogue
- provide an empowering pedagogical environment in which students can increase their confidence and find their individual voice by exploring a range of perspectives and being open to changing their minds in the light of philosophical discussions
- cultivate cross-disciplinary thinking, enabling students to synthesise knowledge from a diverse range of fields, to effectively meet the complexity of current global and national challenges
- respect the intrinsic value of critical and theoretical inquiry; such respect carves space for careful and measured reflection in a complex and fast-paced world
- embrace methodological and cultural pluralism and recognise that there is no single 'correct' way to approach a problem
- develop a broader sensitivity to what diverse cultures can contribute to our shared understanding of the world and our place in it
- equip students with the skills that maintain healthy democratic politics.

## Equity, diversity and inclusion

### Enabling potential

1.5 Access to the teaching of Philosophy prior to higher education is relatively limited in the UK. Accordingly, Philosophy courses typically cater for students who have not previously studied Philosophy as well as those with a secondary-level qualification in the subject.

1.6 Philosophy courses are designed to provide all students with the resources they need to realise their potential. A range of resources, pedagogical approaches and assessment styles are used to this end. As well as theoretical texts, Philosophy courses make use of a diverse range of learning materials, such as podcasts, videos, blogs and artworks, to offer students multiple means of engagement with philosophical topics, issues and arguments. Variety and flexibility are also built into teamwork, learning activities used in classes and virtual learning environments. Such flexibility offers students multiple options regarding their roles in these activities so that they may work to their strengths. Asynchronous alternatives are provided, wherever possible, so that students who cannot participate synchronously can benefit from engaging with them. The range of assessment is also continually broadening to include, for instance, reflective logs, recorded group discussions, critical commentaries, blogs, podcasts and the creation of other digital assets, as well as essays.

1.7 Philosophy courses foster the development of core analytical, critical and communication skills in an environment that is safe, insofar as students can express controversial views and expect constructive rather than hostile responses. Teachers take every measure to ensure that all students are included, and their views are valued. The skills that are fostered in this way are not only relevant to the academic study of Philosophy,

but can help students to navigate an increasingly complex and challenging world shaped by constant social, economic, technological and environmental change. A philosophical learning environment is one that allows the exploration of difficult, controversial, even uncomfortable ideas, provided they are articulated with care, deliberation and respect for potentially opposing points of view. Philosophy, done in a global expansive sense, nurtures the ability to attend to opponents' positions as much as to articulate one's own.

1.8 Teaching aims to work with students to co-create a community of critical enquiry that is maximally inclusive and values the contributions of all its members. Students learn that it takes time to develop a considered and well-grounded view on any significant issue, and that developing such a view will typically involve changing one's mind in the light of engagement with others' expressed views.

## **Nurturing belonging and engagement**

1.9 Recognising the shortcomings of its past, in which the writings passed down in the Western philosophical tradition have been predominantly those of privileged men based in Europe, ongoing diversification of the Philosophy curriculum is imperative for nurturing a sense of belonging for all, and encouraging the full participation of a body of students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

1.10 As Philosophy is centrally concerned with the assessment and development of arguments and has historically been regarded as an adversarial 'debate culture', it is important to note the potential of philosophical environments to be intimidating and to underline measures for ensuring that all students benefit from being involved in a community of enquirers. To create the conditions for an inclusive environment, Philosophy teaching is guided by the prohibitions against discrimination, harassment and victimisation enshrined in the [Equality Act 2010](#). Further, as enjoined by the [Public Sector Equality Duty](#), an effort is made to foster good relations between students who share a relevant [protected characteristic](#) and students who do not share it. Involvement in such a community of enquirers can equip students for participation in contemporary society and the workplace by enabling them to make positive interventions in debates that move them forward.

## **Increasing awareness and understanding**

1.11 Philosophical discussion thrives when it is outward-looking, comparing and assessing alternative perspectives from different cultures and traditions. Philosophy teachers acknowledge this by including known alternative perspectives into the learning materials and discussions. Philosophy graduates should be adept at comparing and assessing alternative perspectives from different cultures and traditions. Philosophy courses employ different tools, teaching strategies and technologies to ensure that all students can have their voice heard in, and make contributions to, ongoing dialogues.

## **Developing self-reflection**

1.12 The discipline of Philosophy is rooted in an appreciation of complexity, difference, and plurality in the human world. It develops students' capacity to sit with multiple divergent views and to situate their own view among them. The use of reflective logs as a form of formative and/or summative assessment is encouraged to help students develop their own distinctive voice and their capacity to critically evaluate their own thoughts and arguments.

## Accessibility and the needs of disabled students

1.13 Taking into account the findings of the [Disabled Students Commission Annual Report 2021-22](#), Philosophy teaching teams take an anticipatory approach to inclusion and accessibility by:

- clearly communicating what is expected of students at the beginning of all courses and modules
- acknowledging that while asynchronous online learning materials are a vital source of learning support for some disabled students, they generate new accessibility issues for others, which are not always mitigated by the use of [automated captioning](#)
- ensuring the provision of multiple means of engagement, activity and assessment in course design.

1.14 Through the application of reasonable adjustments (including anticipatory reasonable adjustments) to support disabled students and neurodivergent students, Philosophy teaching teams create learning environments and assessment cultures that make all students feel at home rather than merely accommodated.

1.15 Philosophical learning in higher education typically involves a close, critical engagement with texts. Philosophy course designers recognise that audio and audiovisual material can be far more accessible than written text for many students, particularly students with disabilities (both diagnosed and undiagnosed), neurodivergent students, and first-generation university students who have not grown up in households where book reading is commonplace. In recognition of this, Philosophy course designers also encourage libraries to prioritise resourcing such material.

1.16 Philosophy recognises that disabled students often have distinctive experiences that enable them to recognise the problematic nature of many views that are widely held without question, both inside and outside of academic Philosophy. It also recognises that this gives them an ability to make novel contributions to philosophical debates from which all participants can learn. Further, by drawing upon their own experience to develop their own distinctive voice and sharing their insights, they would also actively contribute to the development of their peers.

## Education for sustainable development

1.17 Sustainability, as it is understood here, points to a morally praiseworthy attribute of human action: acts, processes and institutions are sustainable just in case they can achieve their ends without thereby endangering the prospects and opportunities of living things. Unsustainable acts, processes and institutions threaten such prospects; for example, by destroying environments in which animal life thrives.

1.18 Some unsustainable acts and processes demand greater attention than others. This Subject Benchmark Statement takes its lead from the [UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), which, among other things, prioritise taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; protect and restore terrestrial ecosystems; conserve the oceans and seas; make human settlements inclusive, safe and resilient; end poverty in all its forms everywhere; and empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all. Philosophy aligns with the skills and learning outcomes of the [Education for Sustainable Development Guidance](#) produced by Advance HE and QAA (March 2021) which should be consulted as a core resource.



1.19 Philosophy in relation to sustainability can be seen to have two key elements. Firstly, it can offer analysis, development, clarification, debate and critique on the very notion of sustainability and adjacent concepts of environmental responsibility, the relationship between humans and other forms of life, and the very idea of the 'natural'. Secondly, although inevitably entangled with this first sense, Philosophy offers students intellectual resources for making life on this planet more sustainable. In the analysis of discourse, concepts and policy, Philosophy allows us to articulate and evaluate arguments for ethical assertions and expose disingenuous sustainability claims, and justified ones. Philosophy allows us to articulate and evaluate arguments for ethical assertions and expose disingenuous sustainability claims, and justified ones.

## **Employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship education**

1.20 [Employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship education](#) supports behaviours, attributes and competencies that are likely to have a significant impact on the individual student in terms of their choice of employment destination and future career success. It prepares students for changing environments and provides enhanced impact through placements and activities that build links between academic institutions and external organisations. Beyond employment, entrepreneurship education provides competencies to help students lead a rewarding, self-determined professional life, well placed to add social, cultural and economic value to society through their careers.

1.21 With its emphasis on clear thinking and writing, logical reasoning and persuasive argument, Philosophy fosters key skills crucial to graduate employability in a wide range of contemporary workplaces and careers. These impactful skills include the ability to generate historically informed and novel ideas, to respond creatively to complex issues, the ability to question decisions and identify alternative approaches, reaching reasoned conclusions and precision in communication.

1.22 Philosophy may be combined with other disciplines to form joint programmes, including with Business Studies, Classical Civilisations, Economics, Education Studies, English Literature, History, Languages, Law, Maths, Physics, Politics, Psychology, and Theology and Religious Studies, or in broader Foundation and Liberal Arts programmes that have Philosophy as a part. Interdisciplinary modules and degree programmes offer students the opportunity to build relationships with students from different disciplinary backgrounds and perspectives.

1.23 Philosophy programmes may be combined with a work placement year and/or with internships to provide further opportunities to apply knowledge, skills and competencies developed during their studies to real-world contexts. Philosophy is often combined with Languages in programmes that involve a year abroad, where new experiences and perspectives are gained.

1.24 Philosophy assessments that enhance employability may include developing a policy brief, connecting theory with current affairs, presentations, peer-review, filmmaking and applying philosophical standards of argumentation to everyday debates and specialised topics.

1.25 Students may have access to funding and support for the development of innovation and social enterprise from their home institution. This provides students the opportunity to apply knowledge, skills and competencies gained through the study of philosophy to the design and development of a business, in particular, developing creative solutions to societal problems.

1.26 Philosophy graduates are ready to take up leadership positions in professional and

community organisations. Philosophy graduates develop strengths in leadership, including confidence (through the developed sense of understanding they will have gained), integrity (through the study of moral and political issues), clear thinking (through developing analytic skills), decisiveness (through training in reason, argument and analysis), conflict management (through training in taking up different perspectives and resolving conflicts in values), communication (through training in discussion and writing effectively) and goal-setting (through training in breaking down complex issues).

1.27 The study of Philosophy opens a wide range of opportunities due to the nature of the skills and attributes it develops. Graduates go into a variety of employment sectors, including the civil service, media, publishing and journalism, business, non-profit organisations, education, human resources, management consultancy, law, information technology, marketing and advertising, finance, and engineering. Many Philosophy graduates have gone on to be successful business owners and hold leadership roles in major organisations.

## **Generative artificial intelligence**

1.28 It is important to situate any discussion of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in relation to the principal skills obtained by students graduating with a degree in Philosophy. GenAI poses both opportunities and risks with respect to the development of these principal skills, and to their assessment.

1.29 There are benefits offered by GenAI in the context of formative development:

- the critical use of GenAI can be practised in class, by getting students to evaluate GenAI responses to philosophical/interpretive questions
- the collaborative use of GenAI may help mediate group activities for students who are more reticent about engaging in traditional discussion
- GenAI can serve as an interlocutor for students as they work through their thoughts on a topic.

1.30 At the same time, there are risks posed by GenAI:

- the uncritical use of GenAI – for example, using GenAI to summarise assigned reading but not checking to see if the summary is accurate – can inhibit students' development of their own reading, analytical and research skills
- without training in critically evaluating the output of GenAI tools, it might be difficult for students to distinguish between their own ideas and what is provided by GenAI tools
- using GenAI in a solitary manner might become a substitute for learning done in class and reduce engagement with lessons and group learning with other students
- GenAI can discourage thinking outside the box and, therefore, can serve as a barrier to originality since the output of GenAI is primarily based on statistical averages of existing human responses.

1.31 GenAI can be used to varying extents in assessment that requires submission of text or images. GenAI's use in such contexts ranges from light-touch aid in composition to even the full generation of the submitted coursework. This is a challenge because of the prominence of essay-writing in Philosophy. There are, however, opportunities that GenAI provides for student summative assessment:

- GenAI's presence encourages the move to normalising diverse and authentic assessment cultures. Traditional coursework essays and closed-book exams disadvantage some student groups, and so a wider range of assessment types is

welcome from an EDI perspective

- since the mechanics of writing are challenging for many students and targeted tutoring for writing may not be available, GenAI can provide written examples of structured argumentation which the student can analyse and reflect upon when organising their own thoughts and writing
- there seems every reason to envisage a future work landscape in which use of GenAI to aid writing and presentation design is standard. Acknowledging this future work landscape presents an opportunity for developing critical and skilful use of GenAI during students' period of study.

1.32 There are consequent risks that come with GenAI in the context of assessment:

- GenAI appears a threat to academic integrity as it is possible to generate a passing essay with little effort by a student
- submitted work for the assessment(s) may not reflect students' ability to meet learning and programme outcomes concerning writing autonomously, even if GenAI is used as a light-touch tool to draft essays.

1.33 Like all radically novel technologies, GenAI is not merely a 'tool'. GenAI transforms its users and their relationships with ideas and the discipline, and the nature of this transformation will depend on the circumstances into which it is introduced. For the technology's effects to weigh more on the positive side, it is helpful to focus on the following:

- understanding the essentially human and interactive nature of Philosophy teaching and learning, to which GenAI can only be a technological adjunct
- considering GenAI as a philosophical topic in its own right that raises questions about the nature of intelligence and what, if anything, is distinctly human about being human
- diversity in assessment, including the development of authentic assessments that involve reflection on the student's personal pedagogical experience.

## 2 Distinctive features of the Philosophy degree

### Design

2.1 A Philosophy degree may span three or four levels and involve a combination of historical, thematic and skills modules. Programme design draws on a global range of individual figures and cultural resources for critically engaging with and reflecting on fundamental questions about, for example, knowledge, existence, morality, the sciences, social-political life and intellectual inquiry itself.

2.2 A Philosophy degree's curriculum design in the first year (FHEQ Level 4 – England/Wales/Northern Ireland, FQHEIS Level 7 – Scotland) may involve a combination of compulsory skills modules, such as an introduction to logic and critical reasoning, compulsory introductory thematic modules (both theoretical and practical), and compulsory introductory modules in the history of Philosophy.

2.3 A Philosophy degree's curriculum design in the second year (FHEQ Level 5, FQHEIS Level 8) may involve a combination of intermediate compulsory and optional modules, which provide more specialised focus for philosophical study. At this level, Philosophy courses may draw on a wide variety of options for both content and skills development. See section 3 below for further detail on this point.

2.4 A Philosophy degree's curriculum design in the final year (FHEQ Level 6, FQHEIS Levels 9/10) may involve a range of advanced optional modules, which provide specialised focus of philosophical study, and may also include some advanced compulsory modules.

2.5 A Philosophy degree's curriculum design facilitates interdisciplinary learning by also enabling students on combined or joint degree programmes to fuse philosophical approaches to, for example, the public sphere with a range of related approaches in cognate disciplines, such as politics and cognitive science.

2.6 Many non-Philosophy disciplines offer degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate levels that are accredited by professional bodies (for example, various branches of engineering, computing and physical sciences, business studies, psychology, medicine, dentistry, and the like). Many of these accrediting frameworks employ philosophical concepts and require that their students be taught them (for example, a variety of concepts within ethics, and concepts such as risk and sustainability). Further, many topics where philosophers have done sustained work will be taught as part of these degrees. While all these concepts and topics can be taught by specialists from different disciplines, they may also be taught by philosophers in partnership with colleagues in other disciplines as an integrated part of degree courses. This pedagogic work by philosophers can lead to students understanding these concepts better and can lead to them being better graduates ready for their chosen professions, as they bring distinct perspectives, distinctions and ways of assessing ideas and arguments.

### Progression

2.7 Over the course of a standard undergraduate degree with honours (FHEQ Level 6; FQHEIS Level 9/10) or, if available, an integrated master's degrees (FHEQ Level 7; FQHEIS Level 11), a Philosophy student will progress from one level of study to the next, in line with the regulations and processes for each institution. However, it is expected that each level would see the attainment of knowledge, expertise and experience that builds towards the final achievement of meeting the threshold-level subject-specific and generic skills listed in this Statement. This will usually include successful completion and the award of credit for the full range of learning and assessment, including any practical components.

2.8 Upon graduation from an undergraduate degree, it would be expected that a student who had achieved a second-class degree or higher would be capable of, and equipped for, undertaking postgraduate study in Philosophy or a related discipline. Entry requirements to postgraduate courses are, however, determined by individual providers and may require specified levels of achievement at undergraduate level.

2.9 Undergraduates studying Philosophy as part of a combined or joint degree course with other subjects, including courses that provide for major and minor options, will achieve core elements of the specific and generic skills outlined in this Statement and will add others according to the areas covered in the other subject(s) of their degree. Additionally, they may explore the overlap between different disciplines, creating further opportunities for interdisciplinary study.

2.10 Any student enrolled in a standard undergraduate honours degree course in Philosophy may exit earlier and be eligible for a Certificate of Higher Education (FHEQ Level 4; FQHEIS Level 8), a Diploma of Higher Education (FHEQ Level 5; FQHEIS Level 9), or other awards depending upon the levels of study completed to a satisfactory standard.

2.11 Over the course of a master's degree (FHEQ Level 7, FQHEIS Level 11), a Philosophy student will complete a range of advanced optional modules, which provide specialised focus of philosophical study. Some of these modules may be compulsory and some may be designed to cultivate advanced research skills.

2.12 Upon graduation from a master's degree, it would be expected that a student who had achieved a Merit or higher would be capable of, and equipped for, undertaking a doctoral degree in Philosophy or a related discipline. Entry requirements to research degrees are, however, determined by individual providers and may require specified levels of achievement at master's level.

## Flexibility

2.13 At providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the duration of a full-time course leading to a standard undergraduate degree is typically three years, or four years for a course involving a year abroad (such as a programme involving languages) or a placement year, or for an integrated master's degree. Scottish bachelor's degrees with honours are typically designed to include four years of study, and integrated master's five, which relates to the structure of Scottish primary and secondary education. Students following part-time routes accumulate academic credit in proportion to the intensity of their study, and their total study time and credit value would be the equivalent to those achieved on full-time routes.

2.14 Higher education providers structure the courses they offer to support students' learning and attainment. Depending on the educational mission of the provider, this may include opportunities to engage in learning on campus, online, and/or through hybrid learning, arranged in terms, by semester, year-long, blocks, or other formats. These may be offered in full and/or part-time modes of study and credit may be accumulated through the completion of micro-credentials, short-accredited learning, recognition of prior learning or accreditation of prior experiential learning in addition to, or in place of, more standard forms of assessment, such as essays.

## Partnership

2.15 Degree-awarding bodies may deliver Philosophy courses in partnership with other providers through validation and franchising arrangements. Others may work with partners who deliver specific elements of the course through placement learning or as part of a degree apprenticeship. Subject Benchmark Statements, such as this one, play an important

role in helping partners design provision that contributes to threshold standards being met in a specific subject area.

## Monitoring and review

2.16 Degree-awarding bodies, and their collaborative partnerships, routinely collect and analyse information and undertake periodic course review according to their own needs. Considering the student voice will form part of this. They draw on a range of external reference points, including this Statement, to ensure that their provision aligns with sector norms. Monitoring and evaluation are a periodic assessment of a course, conducted internally or by external independent evaluators. Evaluation uses information from both current and historic monitoring to develop an understanding of student achievement or inform future course planning.

2.17 Externality is an essential component of the quality assurance system in the UK. Providers will use external reviewers as part of periodic review to gain an independent perspective on any proposed changes and ensure threshold standards are achieved and content is appropriate for the subject.

2.18 The external examining system currently in use across the UK higher education sector also helps to ensure consistency in the way academic standards are secured by degree-awarding bodies. Typically, external examiners will be asked to comment on the types, principles and purposes of assessments being offered to students. They will consider the types of modules on offer to students, the outcomes of a cohort and how these compare to similar provision offered within other UK higher education providers. External examiners are asked to produce a report each year and make recommendations for changes to modules and assessments (where appropriate). Subject Benchmark Statements, such as this one, can play an important role in supporting external examiners in advising on whether threshold standards are being met in a specific subject area.

2.19 Courses with professional and vocational outcomes may also require evaluation and accreditation from professional and regulatory bodies. These are usually done through a combination of site visits and desk-based reviews.

### 3 Content, structure and delivery

3.1 This section explores how the content of the curriculum for Philosophy shapes the likely teaching and learning strategy and the modes of assessment that discriminate between different levels of attainment and allow students to demonstrate they have met the benchmark standards.

#### Content

3.2 Philosophy is a pluralistic discipline and Philosophy programmes cover a wide range of philosophical topics and approaches, for example analytic, continental and comparative traditions in Philosophy, including world philosophies. Within these traditions, the study of Philosophy involves the development of skills and understanding of different methodologies, including formal reasoning, logical analysis, textual analysis, conceptual engineering, interpretation/hermeneutics, and phenomenological analysis. Philosophy programmes focus on both content and methodology, with the aim of not only providing knowledge to students but of supporting them in becoming philosophers.

3.3 Philosophy courses typically include the following areas of study (though the list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- general philosophy, comprising enquiry into ideas of the widest scope and their history. This includes topics such as truth, time, causality, free will, mind and body, God, perception, knowledge, rationality, logic, meaning, duty, goodness, beauty, interpretation, existence, identity, gender and historicity
- philosophical study of particular areas of human practice and enquiry, such as language, science, social science, technology, politics, law, education, religion, literature and the arts, mathematics, and applied ethics
- collaborative pursuit of substantial philosophical questions and methodological or conceptual issues that arise or underpin other disciplines, such as the natural sciences, medicine, economics, business, linguistics and computer science.

3.4 There is a variety of philosophical traditions, each with its own style, approach and characteristic concerns. However, there are a number of distinctive features common to the work of authors working within all these traditions, such as the emphasis on precision and clarity of expression, and the degree of self-reflection. It should not be assumed that these distinct traditions are inherently opposed to one another or cannot engage in fruitful dialogue.

3.5 The range of philosophical material suited to academic study is so wide that any student's studies are necessarily selective. Students may acquire an appropriate grasp of Philosophy from very different courses of study.

3.6 Single honours courses typically include:

- the ideas and arguments of some of the major philosophers in the history of the subject, encountered in their own writings. Which philosophers are relevant depends upon which philosophical tradition is being pursued in the course of study
- some central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind, broadly understood. Students for whom contemporary analytical philosophy is a major part of their study have the opportunity to study elementary formal logic



- some central theories and arguments in the fields of aesthetics, moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood
- some examination of how Philosophy can be utilised to engage with contemporary challenges facing both individuals and societies relating to the environment, culture, social justice, well-being and technological advances
- awareness of some major issues currently at the frontiers of philosophical debate and research.

It is valuable when a single honours course that is primarily in one particular philosophical tradition affords students some acquaintance with some other tradition or traditions.

3.7 Joint honours may include more or fewer of the above elements, reflecting the overall aims of the degree course. In addition, the content of more specialist courses, for example those in the history and philosophy of science, are shaped by their own distinctive aims. A student taking one or more Philosophy modules generally acquires philosophical knowledge and ability in at least one of the areas identified above, history of philosophy, theoretical philosophy or practical philosophy. To support joint degree programmes involving Philosophy, programmes may include interdisciplinary modules such as philosophy of literature, philosophical psychology and political philosophy.

## Teaching and learning

3.8 Philosophy programmes develop skills that enable students to do Philosophy rather than merely study a body of knowledge. It is therefore important that the teaching and learning strategies used model the practice of Philosophy and provide opportunities for students to develop skills and competencies in doing Philosophy. Opportunities to acquire knowledge and understanding of philosophical topics and thinkers must be balanced with opportunities for students to discuss, analyse and develop their own responses.

3.9 Philosophy programmes will vary in size depending on the higher education provider. Consequently, there may be differences in the balance between online and in-person teaching and the variety of topics covered. However, all Philosophy programmes will incorporate a degree of student-led research, opportunities to exchange ideas with peers and allow students to be self-directed in questions addressed within their studies.

## Learning in Philosophy is an active process

3.10 Given the nature of Philosophy, the provision in any module includes a substantial element of learning through:

- the student's own thoughtful reading, starting from an appropriate reading list
- discussion, whether in tutorials, seminars, or in some other format, including live presentations by students
- considered verbal or non-verbal presentation by students of their understanding and critical appraisal of material they have studied, with provision of feedback.

3.11 In areas employing formal methods (including formal logic and formal epistemology), students learn by doing, principally involving the tackling of suitably varied tutorial exercises graded in order of difficulty, with provision of appropriate feedback on their efforts. Formal logic is an area in which computer-assisted learning may naturally be employed, and there is a range of courses available for this purpose.



## **Learning in Philosophy is progressive**

3.12 The philosophical components of any degree course are ordered overall:

- to allow students to progress incrementally in the development of their philosophical understanding and capacities
- in a progression from study with a greater degree of support and assistance to more independent and self-directed study.

3.13 It is recognised that many departments teach a variety of subjects in a two-year cycle in order to allow greater breadth of provision in the two final years. In such courses there is a progression in difficulty from the first year of study to the two final years. Teaching strategies in Philosophy rely on the diversity of thinkers and, therefore, teaching strategies will involve bringing students with different backgrounds together to tackle shared problems. In Philosophy, students are celebrated for their different perspectives. To ensure students are equally able to participate and develop skills, it is important that a range of different modes and opportunities are provided to facilitate discussion, whether online or in person.

3.14 Teaching and learning methods on Philosophy programmes typically include:

- lectures
- tutorials (group learning)
- seminars, including those in which students are responsible in turn for introducing topics
- student-led research/self-directed study
- guided reading coupled with submission of essays for discussion with a tutor
- the completion of a substantial dissertation, under a greater or lesser degree of supervision
- online teaching and learning resources (including virtual learning environments), including the employment of message boards and online discussion forums, live or recorded audio-graphic tutorials or lectures, videoconferencing and wikis
- other discussion groups, including those led by students.

## **Assessment**

3.15 Assessment methods employed will balance the need to test for knowledge and understanding with demonstration of competency in philosophical skills and methodologies. The suite of assessments for any given programme will test for:

- knowledge and understanding
- argument and analysis: demonstrating the ability to reason rigorously, critically, creatively and independently
- presentation: demonstrating the ability to communicate clearly, reliably and effectively.

3.16 Reflective of the diversity within the study of Philosophy, there is a diverse range of ways in which students may demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes for a given Philosophy programme.

3.17 Assessment methods used within a programme of study reflect the student-led nature of Philosophy. They allow space for co-creation in assessment, such as students devising

their own questions to address (for instance, by undertaking a dissertation on a subject of their choice) and by promoting independence in research (by providing students with the skills needed to identify and critically engage with relevant literature). Assignments involve a high degree of self-reflection by encouraging students to draw on their own examples in their presentation of ideas and development of arguments, and requiring them to critically evaluate their own arguments and reasoning. Methods may include, but are not limited to:

- essays
- dissertations
- verbal and non-verbal examinations
- literature reviews
- collaborative work
- peer assessment
- presentations
- blog posts
- curation of philosophical events
- exercises, especially for formal logic and philosophical mathematics
- reflective pieces.

3.18 Some forms of assessment raise issues of accessibility for some students and alternatives are offered in such instances, in accordance with the principles of accessibility discussed above. Students may be given the opportunity to suggest a different type of assessment that would address the learning outcomes, propose their own questions and titles, or respond to set questions drawing on their own research.

3.19 Academic integrity is promoted through the emphasis on authentic assessment, developing novel examples and drawing on personal experience to support the arguments and analysis of the course material. Students are encouraged to respond to the work of others rather than merely reporting its content, thereby promoting good practices in referencing, citation and research. Where technologies are used in assessment, transparency must be ensured. To support learning, in particular the development of philosophical skills and competencies, opportunities are provided for self and peer assessment, with clear marking criteria provided to students.

## 4 Benchmark standards

### Introduction

4.1 This Subject Benchmark Statement sets out the standards that a student will have demonstrated when they are awarded an honours degree in Philosophy at threshold and higher levels. Demonstrating these standards over time will show that a student has achieved the range of knowledge, understanding and skills expected of graduates in Philosophy.

4.2 Most students will attain more than the minimum threshold standards. Each higher education provider has its own method of determining what appropriate evidence of this achievement will be and should refer to [Annex D of the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies](#). This Annex sets out common descriptions of the four main degree outcome classifications for bachelor's degrees with honours: 1st, 2.1, 2.2 and 3rd.

4.3 Please note that the minimum threshold, typical and excellent standards for undergraduate and master's level are not intended to specify universal competence standards for a discipline. If a provider chooses to develop competence standards (as defined by the Equality Act 2010) as part of a programme specification, these can be informed by the relevant Subject Benchmark Statement along with any PSRB requirements. In these circumstances providers should follow the most recent guidance from the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#).

4.4 This section describes three levels of achievement: threshold, typical and excellent. These may be defined as follows.

- Threshold: the minimum acceptable standard of an honours graduate in Philosophy, corresponding to a Third-class degree.
- Typical: the standard attained by most honours graduates, corresponding to a Second-class degree.
- Excellent: the standard attained by excellent honours graduates, corresponding to a First-class degree.

4.5 Students study Philosophy in single and joint honours degree courses, and as an element in modular degrees with other subject components. The descriptions given of attainment levels are intended to apply to single honours courses. The range of knowledge expected and the scope and measure of skills achieved by students studying Philosophy in lower proportions varies correspondingly. Students completing any philosophical module are expected to have competence in some general philosophical skills, and to have knowledge of texts and topics identified in the description of the module.

## Subject-specific knowledge and understanding

4.6 Philosophy graduates will demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of:

Threshold (3rd)	Typical (2nd)	Excellent (1st)
The writings of some major philosophers.	The theories and arguments of major philosophers, encountered in their own writings, along with the associated important areas of interpretative controversy.	The theories and arguments of major philosophers, the associated important areas of interpretative controversy, plus an original interpretation that demonstrates a close reading of primary texts.
Some central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind, broadly understood.	More of the central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind, broadly understood.	Many of the theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind, broadly understood, in a systematic, extensive and comparative way, demonstrating knowledge that may be beyond what has been taught.
Some central theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood.	More of the central theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood.	Many of the theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood, in a systematic, extensive and comparative way, demonstrating knowledge that may be beyond what has been taught.
A limited range of techniques in philosophical reasoning.	A broader range of techniques of philosophical reasoning, and of the philosophical critiques of philosophical methodologies.	An extensive range of techniques of philosophical reasoning, and of the philosophical critiques of, and debates around, philosophical methodologies.
Some of the major issues currently at the frontiers of philosophical debate and research.	Many of the major issues currently at the frontiers of philosophical debate and research and their critical assessment.	Many of the major issues currently at the frontiers of philosophical debate and research and their critical assessment based on a close reading of the primary text, demonstrating knowledge that may be beyond what has been taught.

4.7 It is assumed that students who attain knowledge and understanding at the higher levels will also have demonstrated the knowledge and understanding expected at the relatively lower levels, since higher-level knowledge and understanding are founded on threshold or typical levels.

## Subject-specific and intellectual skills

4.8 Philosophy graduates will demonstrate the ability to:

Skill	Threshold (3rd)	Typical (2nd)	Excellent (1st)
Selecting readings	Select and comment on readings and primary sources.	Select, comment and evaluate readings and primary sources, sometimes beyond the set range.	Critically evaluate and synthesise a broad range of readings and primary sources, drawing on relevant material which may come from a range of different subdisciplines or traditions within Philosophy or from other disciplines.
Interpreting texts	Understand the importance of interpretation of texts.	Read carefully and interpret texts drawn from a variety of ages and/or traditions with a sensitivity to context, plus identify textually based arguments and subject their structure and implications to rigorous assessment.	Draw sophisticated interpretations across various eras and traditions, and critically examine their underpinnings and broader philosophical implications with exceptional clarity and insight.
Terminology	Use philosophical terminology accurately.	Use philosophical terminology precisely, including some specialised terminology.	Use generic and specialised philosophical terminology precisely and, where appropriate, introduce new philosophical terminology.
Formulating arguments	Present an argument, showing an awareness of the nature of sound arguments.	Formulate arguments carefully and scrupulously, drawing only warranted conclusions and predict possible objections and defend the arguments against them.	Formulate sophisticated, nuanced arguments with precision and rigour, drawing well-justified conclusions based on sound reasoning and a comprehensive understanding of relevant concepts and theories that exhibit depth, clarity and an acute awareness of the complexities and implications involved.

Skill	Threshold (3rd)	Typical (2nd)	Excellent (1st)
Explaining	Explain complex matters and ideas.	Clearly explain complex matters and ideas, and appropriately simplify complex matters and ideas and illustrate them with helpful examples.	Tailor explanations to diverse audiences without oversimplification.
Originality	Display some limited originality.	Develop some original ideas and arguments.	Develop in depth original and plausible lines of argument.
Open-mindedness	Identify the strengths and weaknesses of arguments on both sides of a philosophical question.	Review unfamiliar ideas with an open mind and a willingness to change mind when appropriate.	Suspend judgement and approach novel perspectives with an open and inquisitive mindset, coupled with the intellectual honesty to revise firmly held convictions when warranted.
Interdisciplinarity	Identify some of the ways in which philosophical work can inform, and be informed by, work in other disciplines.	Describe and explain some of the ways in which philosophical work can inform, and be informed by, work in other disciplines.	Describe, explain and critique philosophical doctrines in non-philosophical work, and to see the relevance of non-philosophical ideas and research for philosophical debates.
Applications	State some of the ways in which philosophical work can engage with the concerns of ordinary life.	Describe and explain some of the ways in which philosophical work can engage with the concerns of ordinary life.	Exhibit a nuanced grasp of philosophy's relevance to everyday lived experiences, applying philosophical insights to illuminate and address real-world complexities and ethical dilemmas.

4.9 It is assumed that students who attain skills at the higher levels will also have demonstrated the skills expected at the relatively lower levels, since many of the higher-level skills are founded on threshold or typical-level skills.

## Generic skills

4.10 As well as subject-specific skills, a degree in Philosophy will require many other generic skills. At undergraduate level, Philosophy graduates will demonstrate the ability to:

- identify issues, questions and problems
- identify gaps in their own knowledge and acquire new knowledge
- understand and analyse knowledge and information
- synthesise the state of knowledge on a particular topic

- apply knowledge and understanding to provide evidenced conclusions
- communicate effectively and appropriately verbally and/or non-verbally
- present knowledge or an argument in a way that is comprehensible to others
- critically engage with a range of forms of digital technology to collate, analyse, select and present information
- assert intellectual independence, including undertaking tasks independently (with appropriate guidance and support), conducting self-directed research and demonstrating critical judgement
- work collaboratively, including undertaking work in a group or team and/or participating in discussions
- reflect on their own progress, including questions of academic integrity
- identify and examine underlying values and ethics within culture and society and on a personal level.

## Master's level

4.11 Holders of a master's degree in Philosophy will demonstrate:

- a sophisticated and comprehensive understanding of key concepts, theories, issues and debates within the discipline of Philosophy, informed by familiarity with current research and advanced scholarship
- knowledge of appropriate research methods and employment of appropriate research skills
- the ability to formulate, evaluate and critically analyse complex philosophical arguments, texts, positions and problems at an advanced level using rigorous philosophical methods
- expertise in one or more specialised areas or philosophical traditions through in-depth study and research
- the capacity to conceptualise, design and execute a sustained philosophical research project that contributes to the field
- highly developed skills in rational and logical analysis, interpretation of complex ideas, and construction of sophisticated arguments and lines of reasoning
- an appreciation of the broader significance and implications of philosophical ideas in relation to other disciplinary perspectives and real-world contexts
- advanced skills in philosophical writing and verbal and/or non-verbal presentation to effectively communicate complex ideas to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- the ability to engage in sustained philosophical dialogue, debate and collaborative inquiry
- a reflective understanding of the nature of Philosophy as a discipline, its methods, presuppositions, and its relationship to other forms of inquiry
- ethical reasoning skills and an appreciation of the moral dimensions of philosophical problems and the role of Philosophy in addressing ethical, social and political issues
- independent learning and research skills to identify, evaluate and synthesise relevant sources and continue their philosophical development.

## 5 List of references and further resources

British Philosophical Association/Society for Women in Philosophy, Women in Philosophy in the UK, 2021:

<https://bpa.ac.uk/2021/11/15/women-in-philosophy-uk-2021-report/>

Diversity Reading List, Diversity Reading list in Philosophy, updated 2024:

<https://diversityreadinglist.org/>

QAA statement on Creating Inclusive Subject Learning Communities:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/news/creating-inclusive-subject-communities-new-qaa-advice](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/news/creating-inclusive-subject-communities-new-qaa-advice)

SOAS, Decolonising Philosophy Curriculum Toolkit, 2024:

[www.soas.ac.uk/decolonising-philosophy-curriculum-toolkit](http://www.soas.ac.uk/decolonising-philosophy-curriculum-toolkit)



## 6 Membership of the Advisory Group

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