



Subject Benchmark Statement

Philosophy

December 2019

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How can I use this document?

This is the Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy. It defines the academic standards that can be expected of a graduate, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies, and describes the nature of the subject.

The [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (Quality Code) sets out the Expectations and Core Practices that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet. Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland must also meet the Common Practices in the Quality Code.

The Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education (QAA) has also published a set of [Advice and Guidance](#), divided into 12 themes, and a number of other resources that support the mandatory part of the Quality Code. Subject Benchmark Statements sit alongside these resources to help providers develop courses and refine curricula but are not part of the regulated requirements for higher education providers in the UK.

This Statement is intended to support you if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of courses of study in philosophy or related subjects
- a prospective student thinking about studying this subject, 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 this subject.

Subject Benchmark Statements provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the course 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 course design within a framework agreed by the subject community.

It may be helpful to refer to the relevant Advice and Guidance when using this Statement.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Subject Benchmark Statement can be found in QAA's [Glossary](#).

About this Subject Benchmark Statement

This Subject Benchmark Statement refers to bachelor's degrees with honours in Philosophy.¹

It has been produced by a group of subject specialists drawn from, and acting on behalf of, the subject community. The process is facilitated by QAA, as is the full consultation with the wider academic community and stakeholder groups each Statement goes through.

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, or in response to significant changes in the discipline.

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. This Statement does not interpret legislation, nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. The responsibility for academic standards remains with the higher education provider who awards the degree.

Higher education providers may need to consider other reference points in addition to this Statement in designing, delivering and reviewing courses. These may include requirements set out by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and industry or employer expectations.

Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Subject Benchmark Statement where appropriate. Individual higher education providers will decide how they use this information.

Summary of changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement (2015)

This version of the Statement forms its fourth edition, following initial publication of the Subject Benchmark Statement in 2000 and review and revision in 2007 and 2015.

This latest version of the Statement is the consequence of the revision to the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) which was published in 2018. It has been revised to update references to the Quality Code and other minor changes within the sector. Changes have been made by QAA and confirmed by the Chair of the most recent review group.

There have been no revisions to the subject-specific content of the Statement.

¹ 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](#)

1 Introduction

1.1 Higher education providers in the UK have traditionally included a philosophy department, or other unit, generally teaching single honours degrees. It is also fruitful to combine philosophy with other subjects. A reflective understanding of the underlying presuppositions of any subject is immensely valuable.

1.2 One striking feature of the teaching of philosophy at undergraduate level in the UK is the very wide range of honours degrees in which it may properly figure, since the study of philosophy complements the pursuit of many other subjects. A student may take one or more philosophy modules as an outside subject within a degree course whose title makes no reference to philosophy. In addition, there are combined studies degrees including a philosophy component, as well as joint honours courses, whether equally balanced or major/minor.

1.3 This Subject Benchmark Statement takes into account the role that philosophy plays in combination with other subjects, as well as its function as a single honours degree. Degree courses that involve less than 100 per cent philosophy, including joint honours courses, are considered alongside philosophy single honours courses.

2 Defining principles

2.1 The purpose of this section is to outline the framework for philosophy as a subject within higher education providers in the UK at the present time. The basic principles of this framework concern subject matter, method and aim of study.

2.2 Philosophy seeks to understand, and critically to question, ideas concerning the nature of reality, value and experience that play a pervasive role in understanding the world and ourselves. Problematic concepts, such as existence, reason and truth, occur in every sphere of human enquiry. Others belong to particular areas of thought and practice, such as art and politics.

2.3 Philosophy has been practised for thousands of years, and in many different cultures, giving rise to a diversity of traditions. Students of philosophy may be, and in single honours courses generally are, introduced to works originally written in different languages, in different historical periods. This gives the subject great intellectual breadth.

2.4 The vitality of philosophy is enhanced by the existence of a plurality of approaches, and the maintenance and development of distinct (though overlapping) traditions.

2.5 Philosophy is open-ended, changing and extending its range both by its own internal dynamic and also by encompassing new problems generated from outside itself.

2.6 No one method suits all philosophical problems, but philosophy is characteristically done by such means as asking questions, trying out and critically engaging with ideas, making and sharpening distinctions, inventing new vocabularies, criticising and reinterpreting major texts, examining issues that arise in the history of philosophy, using formal techniques (such as logic and the probability calculus), constructing and assessing reasoned arguments, conducting thought experiments, or marshalling evidence from relevant sources.

2.7 Philosophy is not a rare specialism or 'minority subject', to be fostered in only a few centres. The central aim of philosophy is to understand the world and our place in it, and for this reason philosophy is considered to be at the heart of higher education, wherever it is offered.

2.8 Philosophy is a part of the humanities, but its importance extends into many other areas of intellectual enquiry. Subjects such as the philosophy of physics and of biology are increasingly important. The philosophy of social science is relevant for social theory. For example, distinctively philosophical questions arise in considering the central concepts employed in biology (fitness, optimality), economics and business (markets, information, fairness, and policy making (privacy, ownership, interests). The connection between logic and the development of computing is well known. Philosophers have shown themselves very ready in recent years to tackle practical issues, for example, in such areas as applied and professional ethics. Philosophy is both analytical and systematic, taking its own history seriously. Through international links of many kinds, the study of philosophy in the UK connects fruitfully with its study throughout the world.

2.9 The study of philosophy may make up any proportion of a degree course, and the specific objectives of study properly vary accordingly, and may vary also depending upon what other subjects, if any, are in the student's course. The overall aim for all students studying philosophy is to gain a deep understanding of some pervasive and problematic features of the world and of ourselves.

2.10 Philosophy nurtures a wide variety of skills. However, the skills that may be reasonably expected as the outcome of a full single honours degree are not all produced by a single philosophy module.

2.11 The heart of philosophy is a set of modes of thinking acquired through rigorous training. Philosophy, with its stress on independent thought, is by its nature an open-ended subject, constantly being revised and extended in the light of new insights and new problems. Yet its history, at least in the Western world, stretches back for 2,500 years. There is a balance to be drawn in a Statement such as this between being excessively prescriptive about the content of a philosophy course and writing banal platitudes. The dilemma is encapsulated by the fact that great philosophers such as Socrates or Wittgenstein resisted the idea that philosophy is simply a body of knowledge to be taught. At the same time, it is usual for someone fully trained in philosophy to know something about some figures such as Socrates or Wittgenstein.

3 Nature and extent of philosophy

3.1 The following rough mapping of characteristic areas of study in philosophy can be given. It is not intended to be complete or final.

- General philosophy, comprising enquiry into ideas of the widest scope. Under this heading fall such topics as existence, truth, time, causality, free will, mind and body, God, knowledge, rationality, logic, meaning, duty, goodness, beauty, interpretation, gender and historicity.
- Philosophical study of particular areas of human practice and enquiry, such as language, science, social science, 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 cognitive sciences, medicine, economics and business and linguistics, and computer science.

3.2 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, for example, the emphasis on precision and clarity of expression, and the degree of self-reflection.

4 Subject knowledge, understanding and skills

Philosophical knowledge and understanding

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

4.2 A single honours course generally includes, among other studies, the following.

- 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, and may just as appropriately include Descartes, Hume, Wollstonecroft or Wittgenstein as Hegel, Foucault, Arendt or Butler.
- 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 moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood.
- Awareness of some major issues currently at the frontiers of philosophical debate and research.

4.3 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.

4.4 Joint honours may include more or fewer of these 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.

Skills and personal attributes

4.5 Although the doctrines and techniques of philosophy may be usefully applied to practical questions - including, notably, those arising in ethics and political life - they are most distinctively employed in the discussion of problems of a fundamental and recognisably abstract nature. Tackling such problems demands a range of philosophical skills.

4.6 All philosophy graduates acquire a measure of the skills required by the subject, though the range of skills demonstrated, and the degree of competence exhibited, varies depending on whether students take single honours, joint honours, or philosophy modules within an honours degree.

4.7 Although some skills are specific to particular areas of study, others are pervasive through the subject. It is therefore inappropriate for each philosophy degree course, let alone each module, to demonstrate how each skill is separately acquired. Graduates are expected to have acquired the intellectual abilities and attributes listed, most of which are readily transferable to other contexts.

General philosophical skills

- Articulacy in identifying underlying issues in a wide variety of debates.
- Precision of thought and expression in the analysis and formulation of complex and controversial problems.
- Sensitivity in interpretation of texts drawn from a variety of ages and/or traditions.
- Clarity and rigour in the critical assessment of arguments presented in such texts.
- The ability to use and criticise specialised philosophical terminology.
- The ability to abstract and analyse arguments, and to identify flaws in them, such as false premises and invalid reasoning.
- The ability to construct rationally persuasive arguments for or against specific philosophical claims.
- The ability to move between generalisation and appropriately detailed discussion, inventing or discovering examples to support or challenge a position, and distinguishing relevant and irrelevant considerations.
- The ability to consider unfamiliar ideas and ways of thinking, and to examine critically presuppositions and methods within the discipline itself.

Engaging in philosophical debate

- The ability to conduct arguments about matters of the highest moment without recourse to insult or susceptibility to take offence.
- Willingness to evaluate opposing arguments, to formulate and consider the best arguments for different views and to identify the weakest elements of the most persuasive view.
- Honesty in recognising the force of the conclusions warranted by a careful assessment of pertinent arguments.

Breadth of view

The ability to:

- cross traditional subject boundaries, examining the limitations and virtues of other disciplines and practices, and recognising philosophical doctrines in unfamiliar places
- apply philosophical skills and techniques to issues arising outside the academy, including practical reasoning.

Generic skills

The ability to:

- listen attentively to complex presentations
- read carefully a variety of technical and non-technical material
- use libraries effectively
- reflect clearly and critically on oral and written sources, employing powers of imagination as well as analysis
- remember relevant material and bring it to mind when the moment of its relevance arises
- marshal a complex body of information
- construct cogent arguments in the evaluation of this material
- articulate complicated material in a variety of different modes of presentation.

Students have the opportunity to develop skills in the following areas.

- Information technology: digital literacy, email and the internet.
- Informational literacy, using online resources and electronic databases to access relevant material.

4.8 The study of philosophy fosters the development of a range of personal attributes that are important in the world of work, strengthen the graduate's ability to engage in lifelong learning, and contribute to the wider community. These include:

- the ability to motivate oneself
- the ability to work autonomously
- the general management of one's own work to time limits
- a flexible and adaptable mind able to face new situations
- the ability to think creatively, self-critically and independently.

5 Teaching, learning and assessment

5.1 Successful forms of teaching and learning vary widely and may include:

- lectures
- tutorials
- seminars, including those in which students are responsible in turn for introducing topics
- guided reading coupled with submission of essays for discussion with a tutor
- the writing 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, video conferencing, and wikis
- other discussion groups, including those led by students.

5.2 Provision for students in distance-learning courses may employ yet other modes of teaching and student learning.

5.3 Two general principles govern the shape of any provision, whether it is a single module that can be taken as an outside subject or a whole single honours course, or anything in between. How these principles apply varies from case to case.

Learning in philosophy is an active process

5.4 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 presentation in writing by students of their understanding and critical appraisal of material they have studied, with provision of feedback on what they have written.

5.5 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 very naturally be employed, and there is a range of courses available for this purpose.

Learning in philosophy is progressive

5.6 The philosophical component of any honours course of more than a minimum size is 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.

5.7 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.

5.8 Assessment in philosophy aims to test:

- knowledge and understanding of a corpus of material
- the ability to reason rigorously, critically, creatively and autonomously
- the ability to communicate clearly, reliably and effectively.

5.9 Various methods and combinations of methods may be used for this purpose, the principal ones being:

- formal examinations, whether seen, unseen or open-book
- assessed essays
- portfolios of coursework
- dissertations
- formal assessment of performance in live presentations and debates, ranging from seminar presentations to formal viva voce examinations.

5.10 Other assessed outputs may include digital resources such as web pages, wikis, blogs and podcasts. Similarly, records of public engagements (contributions to exhibitions, conferences or workshops, curation of philosophical events) may also be formally assessed.

5.11 Once again, very different overall patterns of assessment may be equally effective in measuring performance. Whatever pattern is adopted, higher education providers assure themselves that the assessment strategy includes safeguards against plagiarism.

6 Benchmark standards and levels of achievement

6.1 The standards of student achievement reflect knowledge and understanding of philosophy and its various techniques and methods, together with a profile of skills which students attain.

6.2 The Subject Benchmark Statement documents these standards in the broadest of terms, recognising the variety of course content and the different emphases that may legitimately be placed on specific elements of the skills profile. It is not intended to stifle experimentation and innovation in the development of new courses or the introduction of novel methods of assessment.

6.3 Not everything that is valuable may be separately tested, measured or quantified. It is not assumed that all of the skills specified as learning outcomes are examined in a manner which contributes directly to the summative assessment. It is widely recognised, for example, that one of the distinctive benefits of higher education is the development of qualities of personal organisation and time management which follow from the attribution to students of considerable responsibility in directing their own learning. Independence and self-motivation may be fostered but not taught in academic departments. The depth or extent of such personal qualities cannot be directly examined, though successful acquisition of them is expected to show through in the application of other skills which are explicitly assessed. Difficulties such as these do not inhibit attempts to inculcate or formatively assess such skills as part of a degree course.

6.4 This section describes two levels of achievement: threshold and typical. These may be defined as follows.

- Threshold: the threshold level of achievement marks the minimally acceptable repertoire of an honours graduate in philosophy.
- Typical: the typical level of achievement marks work of the standard attained by the majority of honours graduates.

6.5 The list of standards is especially appropriate for single honours students taking a wide range of modules, inducing a variety of skills which reinforce each other. The standards, as described, permit assessors to distinguish different degrees of accomplishment.

6.6 The best philosophy graduates achieve excellence beyond the typical standard. Such students may demonstrate, for example, acuity and sensitivity in the interpretation of texts and wide reading beyond the standard course material. They may show an ability to apply it constructively with unusual analytical ability and rigour and a marked independence of thought.

6.7 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 threshold and typical 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. No single module can achieve everything.

Threshold level of attainment

Knowledge and understanding

6.8 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show most of the following.

- Familiarity with the writings of some of the major philosophers.
- Familiarity with some central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind, broadly understood.
- Familiarity with some central theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood.
- Some appreciation of the wide range of techniques of philosophical reasoning.

General philosophical skills

6.9 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show most of the following.

- An ability to identify underlying issues in various debates.
- Grasp of some philosophical problems, mentioning arguments for or against proposed solutions.
- Understanding of the importance of careful interpretation of a variety of texts.
- Views on the success of standard arguments.
- Familiarity with the use of specialised philosophical terminology.
- Awareness of the nature of sound arguments and logical fallacies.
- Appreciation of how generalisations can be supported or weakened by detailed discussion.
- Recognition of arguments on both sides of a philosophical question.

Typical level of attainment

Knowledge and understanding

6.10 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show most of the following.

- Knowledge of the theories and arguments of some of the major philosophers, encountered in their own writings, and some awareness of important areas of interpretative controversy concerning the major philosophers.
- Alertness to opportunities for employing historical doctrines to illuminate contemporary debates.
- A clear grasp of some central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind, broadly understood.
- A clear grasp of some central theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy, broadly understood.
- An awareness of major issues currently at the frontiers of philosophical debate and research.
- Appreciation of the wide range of application of techniques of philosophical reasoning.

General philosophical skills

6.11 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show most of the following.

- The ability to identify the underlying issues in different kinds of debate.
- The ability to analyse the structure of complex and controversial problems, with an understanding of major strategies of reasoning designed to resolve such problems.
- The ability to read carefully and interpret texts drawn from a variety of ages and/or traditions with a sensitivity to context.
- The ability to judge the success of standard arguments.
- The ability to identify textually based arguments and subject their structure and implications to rigorous assessment.
- The ability to use and understand properly specialised philosophical terminology.
- The ability to abstract, analyse and construct logical argument, employing the techniques of formal and informal methods of reasoning as appropriate, together with an ability to recognise any relevant fallacies.
- The ability to identify common persuasive stratagems that cannot withstand philosophical scrutiny and demonstrate how they weaken the arguments that employ them.
- The ability to employ detailed argument to support or criticise generalisations in the light of specific implications.
- Readiness to review unfamiliar ideas with an open mind and a willingness to change one's mind when appropriate.

Engaging in philosophical debate

6.12 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show:

- the ability to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of arguments on both sides of a philosophical question
- readiness to assess arguments carefully and scrupulously, drawing only warranted conclusions.

Breadth of view

6.13 On graduating with an honours degree in philosophy, students should be able to show:

- readiness to cross traditional subject boundaries, so as to examine the limitations and virtues of other disciplines and practices, and ability to identify philosophical doctrines outside the academy
- readiness to engage with the concerns of ordinary life, examining characteristic problems of practical reason (for example, the subjects of ethical and political debate) while being sensitive to a variety of opinions, practices and ways of life.

Appendix: Membership of the benchmarking and review groups for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy

Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy (2019)

The fourth edition, published in 2019, was revised by QAA to align the content with the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education, published in 2018. Proposed revisions were checked and verified by the Chair of the review group of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy from 2015.

Dr Joe Morrison	Queens University, Belfast and Director, British Philosophical Association
Dr Andy Smith	QAA

Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy (2015)

Details provided below are as published in the third edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement.

Dr Joe Morrison (Chair)	Queens University, Belfast and Director, British Philosophical Association
Professor Mark Addis	Birmingham City University
Dr Meena Dhanda	University of Wolverhampton
Dr Robert Northcott	Birkbeck, University of London
Professor Jennifer Saul	University of Sheffield
QAA officer	
Mr Philip Markey	QAA
Employer representative	
Mr James Uffindell	Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Brightnetwork
Student reader	
Miss Serena Worvill	Bath Spa University

Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy (2007)

Details below appear as published in the second edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy (2007).

Professor David Archard	Lancaster University
Professor Robin Attfield	Cardiff University
Professor Helen Beebee (Chair)	University of Birmingham
Professor Stephen Clark	University of Liverpool
Professor John Dupré	University of Exeter
Dr Gordon Finlayson	University of Sussex
Professor Brad Hooker	University of Reading
Professor Don Hutto	University of Hertfordshire
Professor Dudley Knowles	University of Glasgow

Professor M McCabe	King's College London
Mr Tony McWalter	Former Member of Parliament
Professor Adrian Moore	University of Oxford
Professor Onora O'Neill	University of Cambridge
Dr Duncan Pritchard	University of Stirling
Professor Tom Sorell	University of Essex
Professor Jonathan Wolff	University College, London

Membership of the original benchmarking group for philosophy (2000)

Details below appear as published in the original Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy (2000).

Dr J E J Altham	University of Cambridge
Professor A S Bowie	Anglia Polytechnic University
Professor J R Cameron	University of Aberdeen
Professor R Chadwick	University of Central Lancashire
Professor S R L Clark	University of Liverpool
Professor J D G Evans	The Queen's University of Belfast
Dr B Hooker	University of Reading
Dr R Hursthouse	The Open University
DR Knowles	University of Glasgow
Dr I Lloyd	University of Wales, Swansea
Professor R Monk	University of Southampton
Professor J Ree	Middlesex University
Professor T Sorell	University of Essex
Professor R H Trigg (Chair)	University of Warwick
Mr J Wolff	University College London, University of London
Dr D Horton (Secretary)	University of Warwick

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