



# Subject benchmark statement

## History

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**UK Quality Code for Higher Education**  
Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards

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## How can I use this document?

This document is a Subject Benchmark Statement for history, 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 history or related subjects
- a prospective student thinking about studying history, 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 history.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Subject Benchmark Statement can be found in QAA's glossary.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The QAA glossary is available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary](http://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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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:<sup>4</sup>

- *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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> The Quality Code, available at [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code](http://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/2013/06/ESG\\_3edition-2.pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ESG_3edition-2.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a).

<sup>4</sup> Individual Chapters are available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b).

<sup>5</sup> 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](http://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.<sup>6</sup>

## **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 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.

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<sup>6</sup> See further the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: General Introduction*, available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=181](http://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 history.<sup>7</sup> This version of the statement forms its third edition, following initial publication in 2000 and review and revision in 2007.<sup>8</sup>

### Note on alignment with higher education sector coding systems

Programmes of study which use this Subject Benchmark Statement as a reference point are generally classified under the following codes in the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS):<sup>9</sup>

V100 (History by period); V200 (History by area); V300 (History by topic); and V900 (Others in historical and philosophical studies).

### Summary of changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement (2007)

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

- increased emphasis on the central notion of historical enquiry
- more reference to e-learning and digital literacy
- updating of the sections that address the employability of graduates
- further comment on the transferability of historical knowledge and skills to a wide variety of audiences in the public domain
- foregrounding of ethical considerations
- acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of independent study within history degree programmes
- changes reflecting new legislative environment concerning equality and diversity.

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<sup>7</sup> Bachelor's degrees are at level 6 in *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (2008) and level 10 in the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (2001).

<sup>8</sup> 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](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=190).

<sup>9</sup> Further information about JACS is available at: [www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1776/649/](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1776/649/).

# 1 Introduction

1.1 In the first instance, QAA defined the task of subject benchmarking groups as producing 'broad statements which represent general expectations about standards, particularly at the threshold level, for the award of honours degrees in the field.' Following discussions with QAA, it was agreed that the original benchmarking group for history would focus upon providing a framework for programmes which set an acceptable level attainable in principle by the typical history student. The original benchmarking group did not consider that its task was to provide a basis for judgements to be made about a particular student's learning achievement, though a statement (paragraphs 8.2 and 8.3) has been provided which makes reference to judgements in this respect. The benchmark statement now forms part of a framework of external reference points (the Quality Code) that are used by external reviewers in making judgements about a higher education provider's capacity to set and maintain academic standards.

1.2 The term 'programme' is used to refer to courses of study leading to a degree, while the term 'module' is used to refer to units of study within a degree programme. The statement is concerned with students completing bachelor's degrees with honours programmes, not with lower qualification levels and exit points. However, the criteria relating to programmes are relevant to every stage of progression towards the bachelor's degree with honours, from induction onwards. It is recognised that provision in the subject is very extensive including single, combined honours and interdisciplinary programmes. The principal concern of this Subject Benchmark Statement is with single honours programmes leading to a named award in history, but the recommendations and considerations offered below are equally relevant to history modules offered in combined degrees or interdisciplinary programmes with a historical element. In programme design, approval and review of combined degrees, higher education providers take account of the general tenor of the Subject Benchmark Statements for the two subjects concerned and, in the case of history, of the rationale offered for different types of approaches to the study of the past which might be regarded as of particular relevance in historical training. It is accepted that organisational patterns vary across the sector: in some higher education providers history now forms part of a subject cluster in humanities, with no distinct departmental identity. Where the document refers to departments, this is therefore a shorthand for history subject groups, however organised.

## 2 Core principles

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

2.2 The successive history benchmarking groups have seen their task as to lay out criteria for judging the suitability and adequacy of single-honours degree programmes in history. They sought to do this in a way that:

- is as specific as possible without undermining the principle that there are many different suitable and adequate ways of constructing and making available the great richness and diversity of history
- recognises also the need for adaptability to new academic developments in the field, and innovations in programme structures and teaching methods.

2.3 This statement insists that teaching and learning are evolving processes and it is not the intention of this benchmark statement to freeze the teaching of history in a particular model. The Subject Benchmark Statement is a starting point: higher education providers are able to demonstrate how benchmark standards can be built on by the provision of additional or perhaps alternative opportunities.

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

2.5 It is recognised that the concepts, theories and methodologies of the social sciences are used by many historians, most obviously, but by no means exclusively, within programmes in economic and social history. There has been a long and important tradition in the United Kingdom of teaching and writing history within a social science framework, which continues both within distinct degree programmes in economic and social history and as an important feature in many degree programmes in history. Where history is taught within the context of the social sciences, it is recognised that students devote considerable time to acquiring a knowledge of one or more social science. More recently, there has been



an increased interest in the application of cultural theory and approaches derived from literary studies to historical research, and also of methodologies developed in the digital humanities. Where history programmes engage with such work a similar need to acquire relevant methodological tools may apply. In general, students of all types of history - cultural and political as well as economic and social - develop awareness of relevant and appropriate concepts and theories.

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

2.7 Good history teaching takes a variety of forms, and programmes quite legitimately combine different teaching methods in a number of ways. This variety arises from the different interests and abilities of individual scholars, from the requirements of different areas of the field of history, and from the fact that departments or subject groups in different providers have access to different combinations of teaching resources. Each programme defines its own desired outcomes in ways that command general credibility. Departments, in designing their teaching to fulfil those outcomes, recognise the need to assure academic standards by means of the professional external scrutiny provided by internal peer review and external examiners.

2.8 Assessment is a critical element in the educational process and an essential element in effective learning. Given the variety of teaching and assessment practice that may legitimately exist within a history programme, it is all the more important that all departments develop a clear assessment policy which is consistent with the learning outcomes of their degree schemes. The policy documentation specifies clearly what students are expected to learn, how their work will be assessed, and the relationship between the two. At the same time, departments consider and explain the relationship between the functions of formative and summative assessment: that is, between assessment designed as feedback on progress, and assessment for degree award and classification purposes.

2.9 Important abilities and qualities of mind are acquired through the study of history which are readily transferable to many occupations and careers. Some of these qualities and abilities are generic, in that they are imparted by most degree programmes in the humanities and social sciences. But degree-level study in history also instils ways of thinking which are intrinsic to the subject, while being no less transferable. These include an appreciation of the complexity of historical enquiry, a respect for historical context and evidence, a greater awareness of the historical processes unfolding in our own time, and a deeper understanding of the varied traditions current today. These qualities of mind and abilities are most effectively and economically developed by deep and prolonged immersion in, and engagement with, the practice, methods and material of the subject itself. The cumulative acquisition of, and ability to apply, transferable skills and the development of students as competent historians, thus necessarily proceed hand-in-hand. The link between the two lies ultimately in the habits of mind or intellectual approach developed by students who have been trained as capable practising historians. The critical, reflective and creative capacities fostered through the study of the subject continue to be of value and relevance both in further study and in whatever employment graduate historians undertake.

2.10 History graduates are highly employable in a wide variety of professions and careers including (but not confined to) business, industry and financial management, public service, the arts and media, charities and social enterprise, heritage and public history.

They also commonly progress into further training for professions such as law, teaching, social work, libraries and information management, archives and museum work, as well as postgraduate study in history and other subjects. However it is acknowledged that not all history graduates proceed to employment, given that a substantial number of students take history degrees in retirement as part of lifelong learning; that the possession of a history degree is a public good; and that history graduates at all stages of life will make other social and cultural contributions to their communities and the wider world. Further discussion of the skills, qualities and experience of history graduates relevant to employers can be found in paragraphs 3.3, 3.4, and 6.8.

2.11 It is taken as axiomatic that students must progress, and that well designed programmes facilitate their progression. History programmes do not impart knowledge and skills to be passively absorbed: questioning, reading, discussion and writing, along with engagement, exploration and discovery through independent learning on the part of the student are essential. But the importance of historical knowledge must be stressed. The historian's skills and qualities of mind are developed through the processes of acquiring, evaluating and discussing historical knowledge in modules and in the independent study that history degree programmes demand. Although no particular diet of historical knowledge is prescribed, programmes need to impart such knowledge and also to encourage students to acquire more. The learning outcomes of a history degree programme have to be seen in terms of particular pieces of student work - either written or spoken - in which crucial tests are demonstrating an understanding of texts and marshalling an argument in pursuit of meaningful questions about the past. Accordingly, the ability to ask cogent and focused historical questions, to deploy ideas and information, to show conceptual grasp and to shape arguments, becomes difficult to separate in assessment practice from the ability to display appropriately relevant, wide and diverse historical knowledge.

2.12 Given the ongoing development of the European Higher Education Area, the transparency of academic standards is becoming increasingly important within both the national and transnational contexts. The development of *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* within the Bologna process has emphasised the need for both coherent programme structures of appropriate length and the articulation of transparent and comprehensible learning outcomes. This 'outcomes and competences' approach has been adopted by the European Commission-funded Tuning Project. Subject profiles, which include history, are intended as common reference points within the European field of higher education and provide an outline summary for first and second cycle degrees<sup>10</sup>. The articulation of these common reference points is consistent with, and not intended to subsume, UK Subject Benchmark Statements.

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<sup>10</sup> For further details and explanation of terminology, see: <http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu>.

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

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

- The ability to ask and answer cogent and focused questions about the past and to pursue these questions through structured enquiry, selecting and interrogating an appropriate range of materials, including primary and historiographical sources of evidence.
- The ability to understand how people have existed, acted and thought in the always different context of the past. History often involves encountering and sensing the past's otherness and learning to understand unfamiliar structures, cultures and belief systems. These forms of understanding also shed important light on the influence which the past has on the present.
- The ability to read and analyse texts and other primary sources, both critically and empathetically, while addressing questions of genre, content, perspective and purpose. Primary sources include visual and material sources such as topographical evidence, paintings, coins, medals, cartoons, photographs and films, as well as oral source material from the recent past.
- The appreciation of the complexity and diversity of situations, events and mentalities in the past. This emphasis is central to history's character as an anti-reductionist subject fostering intellectual maturity.
- The understanding of the problems inherent in the historical record itself; awareness of a range of viewpoints and ways to cope with this; appreciation of the range of problems involved in the interpretation of complex, ambiguous, conflicting and often incomplete material; comprehension of the limitations of knowledge and the dangers of simplistic explanations, providing an enhanced ability to critically analyse broader historical claims in public life.
- Basic critical skills: a recognition that statements are not all of equal validity, that there are ways of testing them, and that historians operate by rules of evidence which, though themselves subject to critical evaluation, are also a component of intellectual integrity and maturity.
- Intellectual independence: a history programme is not simply a preparation for research in the subject, but incorporates the general skills of the researcher, namely the ability to ask questions, set tasks, pursue structured enquiries and solve problems. This involves the ability to formulate appropriate questions and to provide answers to them using valid and relevant evidence and argument; bibliographic skills; and the ability to gather, sift, select, organise and synthesise large quantities of evidence. It develops reflexivity: that is, an understanding of the nature of the subject, including what questions are asked by historians, and why.
- Marshalling of argument: in written and oral form, drawing on and presenting all the above skills. Such argument has structure and is relevant and concise. In the case of written argument it is expressed in clear, lucid and coherent prose. Orally, it involves the capacity to sustain a reasoned line of argument in the face of others, to listen, to engage in sustained debate, and amend views as necessary in the light of evidence and argument. This is as much the case in distance and online learning as it is in classroom teaching, with technology beginning to deliver opportunities for virtual face-to-face discussions and oral presentations to a group. Where this is not possible, for example through technological limitations or disability, the provider determines how any such reductions in opportunity for the marshalling of argument are compensated for.

3.2 Some programmes, for example economic and social history, incorporate the methodologies of other humanities and social science subjects. A number of specific skills are thus essential to particular types of programme, and desirable though not obligatory in others. Departments or providers are strongly recommended to make provision, where appropriate, for the development of skills relating to at least one of the following: the interpretation of visual and material culture; languages; the use of databases and other digitised resources; numeracy and quantitative methods; archaeological fieldwork; archival study; or skills associated with the study of other subjects with which history has close links. Fieldwork and field trips may play an integral role within a history module or programme. Also, the capacity of international exchanges or study-abroad programmes to enrich students' intellectual and personal development is noted.

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

- self-discipline
- self-direction
- independence of mind, and initiative
- a questioning disposition and the ability to formulate and pursue clearly defined questions and enquiries
- ability to work with others, and to have respect for others' reasoned views
- ability to gather, organise and deploy evidence, data and information; and familiarity with appropriate means of identifying, finding, retrieving, sorting and exchanging information
- analytical ability, and the capacity to consider and solve problems, including complex problems to which there is no single solution
- structure, coherence, clarity and fluency of oral expression
- structure, coherence, clarity and fluency of written expression
- digital literacy
- intellectual integrity and maturity
- imaginative insight and creativity
- awareness of ethical issues and responsibilities that arise from research into the past and the reuse of the research and writing of others.

3.4 As employees, history graduates may be expected to solve complex problems using critical thinking, their own initiative, and analysis and evaluation of diverse, partial or ambiguous data; to express themselves clearly through excellent oral and written communication skills; and to demonstrate a capacity to understand diverse human contexts, cultures and motivations.

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

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

4.2 Time depth: awareness of continuity and change over an extended time span is central to a historical awareness. It leads to an understanding of historical process, and it opens the way to the insights which stem from a juxtaposition of past and present. Programmes introduce students to the issues of continuity and change and give them experience of the intellectual benefits accruing from the study of history over an extended period. Programmes which cover a relatively short time span demonstrate how they provide students with a long-term perspective on their subject matter. It is the case that programmes concentrating on a particular historical era (for example medieval, or late modern) may have different understandings of what constitutes an 'extended time span' reflecting the evidential base for historical study.

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

4.4 Contemporary sources: opportunity for close work on source material originating in the period studied is essential. This often comprises written documents, but when appropriate includes artefacts, visual evidence, oral sources and so on. Students carry out intensive critical work on such source material, interrogating source material in pursuit of structured historical enquiry. This may take place in a 'special subject' module, in other modules, or in independent work. In many instances the work done by students approximates to historical research. While most students do not expect a career in historical research, documentary work is, nevertheless, regarded as a necessary part of learning some of the characteristics of the subject, and also imparts important awareness of research methods and ethical standards to be observed in research, both extremely valuable transferable skills.

4.5 Critical awareness: it is anticipated that all history students reflect critically on the nature of their subject, its social rationale, its theoretical underpinnings, its ethical dimensions and its intellectual standing. While this may take place in a module whose predominant focus is on historiography (historical writing) or on historical method, history students are expected to demonstrate wider historiographical and methodological awareness and understanding in all modules they undertake, and also in independent extended pieces of written work. Particularly in the case of work dealing with primary source material from the recent past (such as oral history, private and official papers and visual and digital sources), students also receive appropriate guidance in, and are able to demonstrate their application of, appropriate research ethics: this may include compliance with specific

and detailed codes and policies covering research ethics developed both by higher education providers and archival repositories. History students are also acquainted with the subject's protocols and expectations regarding the quotation and reproduction of the work of others in their historical writing.

4.6 Diversity of specialisms: history comprises many varieties, each with its distinctive focus and theoretical orientation (for instance, economic, social, political, intellectual, cultural, environmental history, the history of women, and of gender). Students are introduced to some of these varieties of approach and critically engage with the concepts and methodologies of other subjects where appropriate. The aim is not comprehensiveness, but a critical awareness that there are many principles of selection and modes of enquiry. Where a programme is strongly based on one variety, serious comparisons are made with the contribution of others to historical understanding.

4.7 An extended piece of written work: the student is enabled to formulate, execute and complete an independent extended piece of written work under appropriate supervision. In most cases this will be based on contemporary source materials. Alternatively it may take the form of an in-depth historiographical enquiry, as in the critical evaluation of a particular historical controversy, or a particular historian's oeuvre. It may be free-standing, or it may arise from - and be linked to - a taught module. Where such work engages with the recent past, it may be subject to considerations of research ethics both in terms of professional standards expected of historical researchers and the higher education provider's specific codes covering research ethics.

## 5 Progression

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

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

### **Teaching and learning**

6.1 Students are provided with documentation for each individual module which explains what the module is designed to achieve, and the means to its attainment. Students are also provided with an outline of the module structure, information about the nature and amount of assessment, intended learning outcomes and a bibliography. These module guides are designed to be read by students in relation to departmental documentation which includes details of the degree scheme, criteria for all levels of classification and all forms of assessment in use, the range of available programmes, programme structures, assessment methods and weightings, and advice about plagiarism. Both individual programme and departmental documentation makes students aware of the teaching and learning in as clear and straightforward a form as possible.

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

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

6.4 E-learning is an integral part of history degree programmes. Communicating via email, and word-processing of coursework have long been standard practice, and the use of virtual learning environments is becoming similarly ubiquitous. Departments continue to adopt new mobile technologies as a teaching tool and guide students in the use of internet sources for the gathering, analysis and dissemination of information as part of their historical studies. A wide range of abilities, such as the critical use of written and non-written internet resources, the capacity to design websites and create multimedia presentations, and the creation and investigation of complex historical databases, may then be cultivated through a well managed process of progression. E-learning is employed with subject goals in mind as



a means of extending the depth and breadth of a student's historical knowledge, skills and understanding, as well as enhancing their ability to use new and established technologies.

6.5 During the degree programme, all students have the opportunity to engage in seminars or workshops, and forms of small-group work (for distance-learning programmes this may take the form of virtual or e-seminars). In these sessions students participate in group discussions, give presentations and jointly explore themes and arguments. These group discussions are aimed at improving students' understanding rather than at the acquisition of knowledge per se, and are structured in such a way as to maximise effective student participation. They are normally preceded by a prescribed programme of reading. Such work both deepens students' understanding of a theme or subject and develops oral communication skills. It encourages a critical (but tolerant) and self-critical approach to historical discussion, and builds students' self-confidence. It improves their abilities to marshal historical evidence and to summarise historical arguments, as well as to think quickly on their feet, to communicate articulately and persuasively with others, and to recognise the value of close collaboration.

6.6 Most of a history student's time is spent working independently: enquiring, reading, thinking and writing. Contact hours guide, support and facilitate this process, but independent study is a predominant characteristic of a history programme. Bibliographies and other reading advice provide students with the necessary starting points, but students are also encouraged by teaching staff to make imaginative use of the library and the internet to expand their knowledge base and their range of historical approaches. History is largely a text-based subject which requires students to learn to read widely, rapidly and critically, to take good notes, to digest arguments and to synthesise information quickly and intelligently. It also requires them to construct arguments in writing.

6.7 Students undertake a range of assignments reflecting the wide variety of ways in which historical arguments and narratives are articulated. These might include essays of varying lengths; dissertations; seminar and group presentations; the creation of videos, websites and databases; reports; reviews, goblets or document papers and commentaries; and digital history projects. Students may have the opportunity to engage in a work placement or work-related project to enable them to explore the ways in which historical knowledge and skills can be applied and developed through various kinds of projects, fieldwork and placements.

6.8 Where there are work placements or work-related projects these may be provided through association with history-related organisations, groups or projects such as museums, archives, community history, heritage or public history contexts. Since history graduates enter a great variety of occupations, however, it is appropriate for them to engage in activities which will support them into future non-historical careers. The guiding principle for these activities is that they either apply established historical skills through experiential learning, or develop new skills which can be applied elsewhere in the history curriculum. Such experiential learning helps students to understand and articulate the skills that they gain from their degree programme. For history students undertaking a degree in contexts where they are unlikely to pursue a further career, such as those studying in retirement, work-related activities may focus on volunteering or other cultural and social contributions.

6.9 In providing teaching and learning opportunities, departments ensure that the activities envisaged are consistent with the overall goals of the history programme, and are well supported and fully documented, including, where appropriate: information about module requirements and responsibilities; intended learning outcomes; supervision arrangements; and assessment strategies and standards. It is explained to students how such assignments enable them to improve their writing and oral communication skills, as well as those of evidence-handling, the critical treatment of themes/historical arguments and

the thoughtful, persuasive presentation of their work. The view that all modules need to be of one term/semester duration is not supported. Certain types of historical modules have been most effectively taught on a year-long basis. Where academic judgement indicates this to be desirable, this model should continue to be followed.

6.10 All students receive critical and constructive comment on their progress as an integral part of teaching and learning. Individual encounters with academic staff, whether as part of a regular teaching arrangement, feedback on written work, or more occasional meetings, are essential to helping students clarify areas of confusion and gain a better understanding of their own performance as well as of historical themes and issues. There is adequate discussion of, and response to, a student's individual work.

6.11 There is a wide variety of guidance and advice for staff and students on learning approaches and teaching resources which are available from the Higher Education Academy's Resource Centre.<sup>11</sup>

## **Assessment**

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

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

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

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

6.16 Departments also consider whether single honours students are given the opportunity to have their critical and communication skills assessed in other forms. The development of oral communication skills is important in the process of educating a

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<sup>11</sup> Higher Education Academy's Resource Centre, [available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources).

historian and, where practicable, students have opportunity to be assessed on this skill. Oral presentations may be of different types including, for example, a formal paper delivered to a group; general contributions to seminar discussion; chairing or otherwise leading seminar discussions; and responses to contributions made by others.

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

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

6.18 It is not the intention of the subject benchmark review group for history to prescribe any one assessment strategy. Establishing criteria for classification is the business of departments and higher education providers. Different modes and weightings of assessment are appropriate to different schemes of study, and reflect the particular emphases and concentrations in those programmes. In order to evaluate properly the range of undergraduate study, however, a bachelor's degree with honours in history is awarded on the basis of more than one form of assessment.

## 7 Assessment criteria

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

7.2 Published criteria and grade descriptors are available for all forms of assessment. Criteria at all levels of classification give predominance to positive achievement, making use of the full range of marks set out in marking scheme. Feedback to students on performance indicates the kinds of improvements that would be necessary to achieve a higher mark. Guidance on assessment and feedback can be found on the Higher Education Academy's website.<sup>12</sup>

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

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<sup>12</sup> Higher Education Academy's guidance on assessment and feedback, available at: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/assessment](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assessment).

## 8 Learning outcomes and achievement

8.1 All graduates in history should be able to demonstrate competence in the subject; the purpose of schemes of assessment is to evaluate the level of competence achieved. In establishing and maintaining history degree programmes, departments take into account the following summary of learning outcomes. The assessment of all these learning outcomes is not necessarily required within a single programme.

- Command of a substantial body of historical knowledge.
- The ability to develop and sustain historical arguments in a variety of literary forms, formulating appropriate questions and utilising evidence (see paragraph 3.1).
- An ability to interrogate, read, analyse and reflect critically and contextually upon contemporary texts and other primary sources, including visual and material sources like paintings, coins, medals, cartoons, photographs and films (see paragraphs 3.1, 4.4 and 6.14).
- An ability to interrogate, read, analyse and reflect critically and contextually upon secondary evidence, including historical writings and the interpretations of historians (see paragraphs 3.1 and 4.5).
- An appreciation of the complexity of reconstructing the past, and the problematic and varied nature of historical evidence (see paragraph 3.1).
- An understanding of the varieties of approaches to understanding, constructing, and interpreting the past; and, where relevant, a knowledge of concepts and theories derived from the humanities and social sciences (see paragraphs 2.4 and 4.6).
- The ability to gather and deploy evidence and data to find, retrieve, sort and exchange new information (see paragraphs 3.3 and 6.17).
- A command of comparative perspectives, which may include the ability to compare the histories of different countries, societies, or cultures (see paragraph 4.3).
- Awareness of continuity and change over extended time spans (see paragraph 4.2).
- An understanding of the development of history as a subject and the awareness of different types of historical question and historical methodology (see paragraph 4.6).
- An ability to design, research, and present a sustained and independently conceived piece of historical writing (see paragraphs 4.7 and 6.15).
- The ability to address historical problems in depth, involving the use of contemporary sources and advanced secondary literature (see paragraphs 4.4 and 6.15).
- Clarity, fluency, and coherence in written expression (see paragraphs 3.1, 3.3, 6.6, 6.7, 6.13 and 6.17).
- Clarity, fluency, and coherence in oral expression (see paragraphs 3.1, 3.3, 6.5, 6.7 and 6.16).
- The ability to work collaboratively and to participate in group discussion (see paragraphs 6.5 and 6.17).
- Competence in specialist skills which are necessary for some areas of historical analysis and understanding, as appropriate (see paragraphs 3.2 and 6.17).
- An understanding of the ethical dimensions of historical study, writing and research (see paragraphs 3.3, 4.4, 4.5 and 4.7).

8.2 A student who has graduated with an excellent performance in a single honours bachelor's degree in history can be expected to have mastered a very extensive range and depth of historical knowledge in particular areas of the past and to have demonstrated a very superior command of nearly all the historical and transferable skills outlined in paragraph 8.1. The typical history graduate will have acquired a considerable range and

depth of historical knowledge in particular areas of the past and is able to show a sound competence in nearly all of the historical and transferable skills outlined in paragraph 8.1.

8.3 Those students graduating with a single honours bachelor's degree in history at the threshold level may well have demonstrated an unevenness of performance in the various modules, and in the assessed work, in their degree programme. Some students may perform consistently at the threshold level, but the majority who graduate at this level will have performed unevenly. They will have shown in parts of their degree programme levels of competence demonstrated by the typical student and, at their best, they may have displayed sound historical knowledge and competence in many of the historical and transferable skills expected of an honours history graduate. Only a part of their performance is likely to have been assessed at the lowest threshold level. Even those students who perform consistently at this level, however, demonstrate a basic understanding of historical evidence of different types; the ability to produce structured, if underdeveloped and incomplete, arguments or to write a thorough narrative with insufficient analysis; and the ability to express in a generally grammatical and intelligible manner, which may lack clarity and fluency.

## 9 Summary of recommendations

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

- undertake a programme which fosters the skills and qualities of mind listed in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.3
- be provided with comprehensive module and programme documentation
- be provided with opportunities to participate regularly in a variety of structured settings with academic staff and other students
- receive diagnostic feedback on their progress as an integral part of teaching.

9.2 The subject benchmarking group for history recommends that all students of single honours bachelor's degrees in history:

- follow a programme which gives them practical experience of the intellectual benefits occurring from studying the subject over an extended period of historical time
- study the history of more than one society or culture
- carry out intensive critical work on source materials generated by the period under study
- be expected to reflect critically on the nature of their subject
- be introduced to some of the many varieties of history
- be involved in lecture or lecture-type arrangements which capture their interest and excite their curiosity
- engage in seminars and forms of group work
- undertake a wide range of assignments
- be assessed in a significant part on their essay-writing skills
- be assessed on their understanding of and ability to handle contemporary source material
- be assessed on their ability to address historical enquiries and problems in depth.

9.3 The subject benchmarking group for history recommends that all higher education providers give serious consideration to requiring that history single honours bachelor's degree students:

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

9.4 Departments may also wish to consider the desirability of providing the opportunity for all single honours bachelor's degree students to be assessed on:

- varying types of and extended writing
- oral communication
- other forms of presentation - including the creation of websites, video recordings and presentation slides.

## 10 Concluding remarks

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



## **Appendix A: Membership of the benchmarking and review groups for the Subject Benchmark Statement for history**

### **Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for history (2014)**

Professor Arthur Burns	(Co-chair) King's College London Royal Historical Society
Professor Jane Longmore	(Co-chair) Southampton Solent University The History Forum, Higher Education Academy
Professor Alan Booth	University of Nottingham
Dr Arthur Chapman	Institute of Education, University of London
Dr Marcus Collins	Loughborough University
Dr Paul Corthorn	Queen's University Belfast
Dr Pat Cullum	University of Huddersfield
Peter D' Sena	Higher Education Academy
Professor Jackie Eales	Canterbury Christ Church University The Historical Association
Dr Elaine Fulton	University of Birmingham
Dr Vicky Gunn	University of Glasgow
Dr Jerram Leif	University of Manchester
Dr Keith McLay	Canterbury Christ Church University
Dr Alison Twells	Sheffield Hallam University
Dr Jamie Wood	Lincoln University
Dr Dave Wyatt	Cardiff University
Dr Catherine Kerfoot	QAA
<b>Employer representatives</b>	
Dr Melinda Haunton	National Archives
Dr Valerie Johnson	National Archives
<b>Student reader</b>	
Adam Williams	University of South Wales

## **Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for history (2007)**

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

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

## Membership of the original Benchmarking Group for History (2000)

Details provided below are as published in the original Subject Benchmark Statement.

Dr M Arnot

Professor D Bates

Professor C Clark

Professor M Daunton

Professor H Dickinson

Dr Susan Doran

Professor W Doyle

Professor D Eastwood

Professor E Evans

Professor A Fletcher (Chair)

Professor A Jones

Mr R Lloyd-Jones

Dr E McFarland

Professor A Porter

Professor P Stafford

Professor J Tosh

University of Glasgow

University of Warwick

Churchill College, University of Cambridge

University of Edinburgh

St Mary's College, Twickenham

University of Bristol

University of Wales, Swansea

University of Lancaster

University of Wales, Aberystwyth

Sheffield Hallam University

Glasgow Caledonian University

King's College London

University of Huddersfield

University of North London

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