



Subject Benchmark Statement

Area Studies

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About this Statement

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

Key changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement include:

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

How can I use this document?

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

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

You may want to read this document if you are:

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

Relationship to legislation

The responsibility for academic standards lies with the higher education provider which awards the degree. Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them by their relevant funding and regulatory bodies. This Statement does not interpret legislation, nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements.

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

Additional sector reference points

Higher education providers are likely to consider other reference points in addition to this Statement in designing, delivering and reviewing courses. These may include requirements set out by PSRBs and industry or employer expectations. QAA has also published [Advice and Guidance](#) to support the [Quality Code for Higher Education](#), which will be helpful when using this Statement - for example, in [course design](#), [learning and teaching](#), [external expertise](#) and [monitoring and evaluation](#).

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

1 Context and purposes of an Area Studies degree

Context

1.1 Area Studies is a dynamic field. It is a broad term applied to the study of the society or societies of specific geographical areas/regions of the world, and the communities associated with them, across any period of time. In many instances, though not exclusively, such studies are language-based and involve the study of one or more relevant languages.

1.2 What is understood by 'area' in Area Studies may be defined in various ways, for example by traditional geographical designations, or by other intellectual constellations that seek to blur such traditionally designated borders. These include:

- national or regional designations (such as African Studies, American Studies, Asian Studies, Asia Pacific Studies, Australasian Studies, British Studies, Canadian Studies, Caribbean Studies, East Asian Studies, French Studies, Italian Studies, Kurdish Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Russian Studies, Transatlantic Studies)
- geopolitical or institutional criteria (such as Post-Soviet Studies, European Union Studies, Global Studies, Latin American Studies, Majority World Studies)
- criteria based in networks, processes or themes (such as Black Studies, Diaspora Studies, Decolonial Studies, Gender Studies, Indigenous Studies, Post-Colonial Studies).

1.3 Courses in Area Studies are multidisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary, usually drawing from and integrating two or more disciplines within their curricula. These include:

- single discipline fields (such as Anthropology, Geography and Human Geography, History, Literature, Politics, Sociology)
- inter and multidisciplinary fields (such as Cultural Studies, Development Studies, Digital Humanities, Environmental Humanities, Film Studies, International Relations, Media Studies, Medical Humanities).

1.4 The Subject Benchmark Statements in these other disciplines are therefore useful cross-references for Area Studies.

Purposes and characteristics of an Area Studies degree

1.5 In the UK higher education sector, Area Studies courses offer students the opportunity to undertake in-depth study of the culture, economy, history, languages, politics and society of one or more particular area or region, however defined.

1.6 Area Studies courses are diverse, flexible and multidisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary, marrying approaches and frameworks from the arts, humanities and the social sciences. Such an approach enables students in Area Studies to acquire a unique depth and breadth of insight into the social, cultural, political, economic and environmental context and dynamics of an area or region and the communities associated with them, as well as an integrated set of skills which are valued in many contexts beyond higher education.

1.7 Where Area Studies courses cover multistate areas, a comparative study of societies or groups within the region or area enables a deep appreciation of what they may have in common, as well as key similarities and differences between them - be they cultural, economic, environmental, historical, social or political.

1.8 Area Studies students gain parallel and complementary knowledge from working across local and global contexts, as well as a range of skills and attributes in intercultural competence and the appreciation of diversity across and within societies.

1.9 Area Studies graduates are distinguished not only by the agility, breadth and flexibility of thinking, habits of learning and intellectual inquisitiveness outlined above, but also by the versatility and breadth of skills they possess. These include written and verbal communication across multiple formats; analytical thinking; creative problem-solving; collection and classification of information; interpretation and evaluation. Area Studies graduates are critical thinkers who are self-aware, empathetic and resourceful. They possess the skills and capacities to make a comprehensive contribution to societal development, operating across global contexts. They are attuned to social justice, environmental responsibility, and the quest to tackle global challenges.

1.10 Area studies courses are offered as single honours, joint honours and as major and minor elements of combined honours degrees at undergraduate level, as well as at postgraduate level.

1.11 Area Studies courses offer a wide range of modules that may include the study of culture, economy, environment, history, language, literature, politics, religion and society, among others. Studying, comparing and contrasting different areas, and working across disciplines, provides opportunities to appreciate diversity, complexity and interculturality.

1.12 Many Area Studies courses offer learners the opportunity to spend a period of study abroad, ranging from a short stay to a semester or a year. Whatever its duration, a period of residence abroad enhances students' intercultural awareness and competences, and their employability.

1.13 Where appropriate to the objectives of the degree (for instance, in language-based Area Studies courses), training is provided in a language other than English, which enables students to develop their language and communication skills as well as their linguistic knowledge.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

1.14 The field of Area Studies investigates the experiences of people across the globe in both historical and contemporary settings. It approaches its subjects from a range of disciplinary perspectives, and actively brings those different perspectives into dynamic dialogue with one another. Not only does Area Studies explore regions of remarkable heterogeneity, but also informed respect for differing experiences is an essential element of its method for doing so. It is dedicated to recognising and understanding the multiple subjective experiences produced by interfaces of culture and language, history and heritage, faith and social status, and/or ideas of race and gender. Approaching this great diversity in a spirit of inclusion is critical both to the achievement of equality and to the success of the field as a whole. At the same time, the progress of both teaching and researching in the field relies upon the guarantee of academic freedom, the undergirding values of which may not be universally recognised across all societies of specific geographical areas/regions of the world.

1.15 Area Studies educators engage and support students in their development as critical, empathetic and self-reflective learners. Students learn to question. They are encouraged to rigorously analyse not only the diverse world in which they live, but also the concepts and theories constructed to understand it. The academic disciplines which inform Area Studies developed historically in intellectual contexts shaped by imperialism, colonialism, militarism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, religious prejudice, ableism and racism. As a field, Area

Studies seeks to account for and interrogate such disciplinary contexts. Students are thus supported in rigorous engagement with this intellectual history so as to develop a critical and evidence-based understanding of how the field is shaped and how knowledge is historically and contextually produced. Students' exposure to multiple disciplines helps them learn to recognise the strengths and the shortcomings, the insights and the omissions, the visions and the illusions of each in turn. This requires engagement with the work of knowledge-producers from all parts of the world and at all levels of the societies explored - including those whose ideas and experiences have historically been marginalised or excluded.

1.16 The field is committed to the creation of inclusive learning experiences that value diversity, promote equality and foster a sense of belonging. This may take the form of diversified module content, readings, pedagogies, theoretical approaches, and assessment designs. Each of these helps to ensure that marginalised voices, traditions and experiences are taken seriously while exclusion is minimised. Courses are designed to create learning communities that are accessible to all students, including those from marginalised backgrounds, and in which they feel safe and welcome. All students deserve a learning environment in which they are not only able to participate, but to excel. Course teams therefore work to ensure that teaching, learning and assessment support all students both to learn and to demonstrate that learning. At the same time, they evaluate student experiences and outcomes so as to address gaps in access, attainment and awarding, especially in cases where these might perpetuate exclusion.

Accessibility

1.17 Students enter Area Studies from a wide range of educational, social and cultural backgrounds which enhance the diversity of the student body and of the subject as a whole. Admission criteria are sensitive to this diversity and encourage it as much as possible by avoiding requirements that might disadvantage some categories of applicants. Area Studies courses are therefore very welcoming, as well as being open and transparent, both as to what they can offer students and what is expected from the students themselves in terms of skills and commitment to the programme of study.

1.18 Many Area Studies courses have an expectation of a period of residence or study abroad. Tutors and coordinators ensure that placements are not exclusionary, respecting all protected characteristics, with facilities and resources that are sufficient and accessible for all participants. Placements are made available to disabled students, students with specific learning differences, students with caring responsibilities, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, and students with religious observance requirements. Alternative placements include in-country community engagement activities, virtual mobility, and virtual residencies.

1.19 As recommended by the [Disabled Students' Commission](#), Area Studies supports students with varying forms of disability in higher education. To this end, Area Studies courses create and encourage an inclusive learning environment that offers flexibility for students with disabilities and in which students may develop their skills with confidence. Courses in Area Studies provide learning materials in multiple formats which support students with visual and auditory requirements. There are multiple forms of lectures, seminars and assessment methods that support the particular requirements of students with disabilities. Specific care and attention in the delivery of material is given to those on the autism spectrum and to those with social anxieties.

1.20 Some Area Studies courses, particularly at postgraduate level, offer a range of study modes, including part-time, online, and hybrid or blended forms of study. The availability of these different modes of study can offer significantly increased access options for a variety of students, particularly those who may not be geographically near to a place of study, or

who are unable to study full-time. Where a course is offered in different modes, care is taken to ensure a broad parity of experience for all students. Care is taken by course providers to ensure that digital resources and platforms used in relation to teaching in all study modes are made as accessible as possible.

Sustainability

1.21 Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) seeks to transform educational systems through the creation of both curriculum structures and subject-relevant content to support the creation of a better world. Area Studies courses are therefore especially attuned to thinking about the sustainable development process which addresses environmental, social and economic concerns for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity. This definition is based on the latest guidance produced by Advance HE and QAA: [Education for Sustainable Development Guidance](#) and draws on guidelines of [UNESCO's roadmap on ESD](#). Importantly, when embedding ESD in Area Studies curricula, higher education providers use an intersectional approach that demonstrates the interrelationships between environmental, social and economic concerns.

- The interdisciplinary nature of Area Studies provides unique opportunities to equip students with key sustainability skills and competencies. These enable the development of awareness, values, knowledge and literacy around the climate and ecological crises that unequally affect different societies, communities and populations.
- Embedding ESD in Area Studies involves therefore not only the incorporation of sustainability-related topics in the curriculum, but also the development of the values, capacities and behaviours of students. Through the development of critical, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking, for example, students come to understand the complex and interconnected nature of sustainable development, racial, gender and social justice issues. This is done in tandem with objectives such as internationalisation, decolonising learning, promoting interdisciplinary learning, and civic engagement.
- ESD approaches in Area Studies can thus address multidimensional challenges in societies, by connecting up issues of peace, justice and the environment and supporting students in the acquisition of potential strategies for bringing about behaviour change and societal transformation.

Enterprise and entrepreneurship education

1.22 Notwithstanding the ESD competencies listed above, Area Studies necessarily fosters key behaviours, attributes and competencies that are core to [Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education](#). The acquisition of regional knowledge supports the development of students' open-mindedness, curiosity, flexibility, reflective capacities, ability to adapt to changing contexts and to think strategically, as well as their digital literacies. The interdisciplinary nature of Area Studies courses supports students in developing the ability to understand, compare and adapt different approaches to design, including collaborative and independent problem solving.

1.23 By promoting the development of cross-cultural knowledge, understanding and communication skills, Area Studies graduates complete their studies as more flexible, adaptable and resilient learners. This can be enhanced by learning a language and/or

undertaking a period of residence abroad, where this is part of the course. The range of learning experiences typically embedded within a course support:

- the acquisition of networking skills
- a greater appreciation of ethical, social, cultural diversity and environmental issues
- the development of linguistic abilities to engage with people of other cultures
- and skills in communication and negotiation.

1.24 Area Studies is particularly effective at encouraging students to develop creative and strategic approaches to contemporary regional and global challenges such as migration, conflict, environmental change and inequality. The behaviours, attributes and competencies that students acquire through the teaching and learning experiences enable them to enter a wide range of employment sectors upon graduation. These include the diplomatic sector, think tanks, businesses, international and regional organisations, religious institutions, non-governmental organisations, teaching, publishing, community-based organisations, communications, the media and journalism.

2 Distinctive features of Area Studies courses

Design

2.1 Area Studies courses are designed to provide students with an integrative education, benefitting from multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural areas of specialisation. With this interplay of disciplines from across the humanities and social sciences (see paragraph 1.3) and theoretical approaches, a balanced study of the history, literatures, cultures and religions, as well as the political and socioeconomic context of diverse regions, is achieved in a variety of ways. The study of cultural identity and traditions, migration, gender and post-colonial thinking, for example, also enriches the knowledge acquired.

2.2 Students benefit from a variety of pedagogical approaches, and from a range and choice of modules that allow them to progress through a course with increasing levels of specialisation. The learning experience may include simulation exercises, debates, research seminars, work placements, visits to places of special interest, project-based learning and a variety of forms of civic engagement. Some courses offer language learning and/or residence abroad (see paragraphs 1.12 and 3.12-17).

2.3 Courses are built on progressively more complex learning outcomes which are aligned with teaching methods and assessment. Course design is led by subject experts and practitioners, while also acknowledging the role of student engagement and co-production. This is achieved by, for example, actively encouraging students to provide feedback on their teaching and learning experiences, by ensuring effective student-staff liaison structures are in place, and by building strong student-centred learning communities and cohort identities that parallel the values inherent in Area Studies more broadly.

2.4 There are often overlaps between Area Studies, social sciences and humanities courses, with modules shared between them and course design emphasising interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary crossovers.

Progression

2.5 Over the course of a degree with honours (FHEQ Level 6; FQHEIS Level 10) an Area Studies student will progress from one level of study to the next, in line with the regulations and processes for each institution. However, it is expected that each level would see the attainment of knowledge, expertise and experience that builds towards the final achievement of meeting the threshold-level subject-specific and generic skills listed in this Statement. This will usually include successful completion and the award of credit for the full range of learning and assessment, including any practical components. Upon graduation from an undergraduate degree, it would be expected that a student who had achieved a second-class degree or higher would be capable of, and equipped for, undertaking postgraduate study in Area Studies or a related discipline. Entry requirements to postgraduate courses are, however, determined by individual providers and may require specified levels of achievement at undergraduate level.

2.6 Undergraduates studying Area Studies courses as part of a combined or joint degree with other subjects will achieve core elements of the specific and generic skills outlined in this Statement and will add others according to the topics covered in the other subject(s) of their degree. Additionally, they may explore the overlap between different disciplines, creating further opportunities for interdisciplinary study.

2.7 At postgraduate level, courses in Area Studies enable students to pursue critical approaches and develop analytical skills in greater depth, often through the use of interdisciplinary methodologies.

2.8 In a standard undergraduate honours degree course in Area Studies, students may exit earlier and be eligible for a Certificate of Higher Education, a Diploma of Higher Education, or other awards depending upon the levels of study completed to a satisfactory standard. At providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the standard duration of a full-time undergraduate course is three years. Scottish bachelor's degrees with honours are typically designed to include four years of study, which relates to the structure of Scottish primary and secondary education. Students following part-time routes accumulate academic credit in proportion to the intensity of their study, and their total study time and credit value would be the equivalent of the three or four-year degree.

Flexibility

2.9 Higher education providers structure the courses they offer to support students' learning and attainment. Depending on the educational mission of the provider, this may include opportunities to engage in learning on campus, online, and/or through hybrid learning, arranged in terms, by semester, year-long, block or other formats. These may be offered in full and/or part-time modes of study and credit may be accumulated through the completion of micro-credentials or short accredited learning.

Partnership

2.10 Higher education providers offer a variety of opportunities for students to widen their educational experience beyond the teaching environment. Such opportunities are usually arranged through agreements with a diversity of partners, which range from other educational institutions to community organisations, businesses or governmental and non-governmental organisations, some of which can be based in other countries. These partnerships can facilitate activities such as residence and study abroad, student exchanges, work placements and internships, volunteering, mentoring, participation in specialised events (such as research seminars), co-research in specific projects, or visits to places of special interests, (such as international institutions, museums or exhibitions).

2.11 The value added by these opportunities cannot be underestimated, as they contribute to appropriate cultural immersion and develop the variety of students' competencies and values described in previous sections. The establishment of partnerships is guided by provider-specific policies and programme specifications and may be influenced by the availability of resources. Providers take due care when setting up any partnership to ensure the safety of students, with appropriate provisions in place for those with additional support requirements.

2.12 It is important that institutions encourage and facilitate institutional partnerships that ensure students' experience of them is one of equality and inclusivity.

Monitoring and review

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

2.14 Externality is an essential component of the quality assurance system in the UK. Providers will use external reviewers as part of periodic review to gain an external

perspective on any proposed changes and ensure threshold standards are achieved and content is appropriate and current for the subject.

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

3 Content, structure and delivery

Content

Subject-specific content

3.1 Area Studies is a dynamic and varied subject that is not limited to any one discipline but instead employs a range of disciplinary perspectives designed to produce an informed and well-rounded understanding of the area under study. This could include a single country such as China, Russia or the United States; a region such as Africa, Europe or the Middle East; or a wider cultural, religious or linguistic grouping such as Islam. It could also extend to a global diaspora such as the Francophonie. It is therefore characterised by a multi and interdisciplinary approach that encourages thinking across and between two or more disciplines.

3.2 Many courses achieve their aims by specifying a core study requirement placed within a wider context of specialised offerings. Such offerings generally increase as the student progresses through the course, allowing them to develop specialised knowledge within the broader field across their studies.

3.3 Area Studies courses may include a comparative element of some kind, thus highlighting similarities and differences within and between areas of the world, and fostering cross-cultural, transnational and international perspectives, including those of the student's own country. In addition, by requiring student engagement with more than one discipline they encourage consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of contrasting methodologies and theories applied to the analysis of the area studied, with reference (when appropriate) to postcolonial and other perspectives. Sustainability, employability, equality, diversity and inclusivity are all fostered within Area Studies.

3.4 Some Area Studies courses offer language learning and/or residence abroad (see paragraphs 1.12 and 3.12-17). Language competence may be taken to form part of the Area Studies component in, for example, a degree course termed Latin American Studies, or it may be considered to be distinct in some joint and combined honours courses. Proportions may vary, as suggested by course titles such as European Studies 'and' or 'with' Spanish (where the use of 'and' or 'with' signifies differing proportions of the total course). For more detail about language teaching and learning, please see the [Languages, Cultures and Societies Subject Benchmark Statement](#).

Generic, transferable and employability skills

3.5 Area Studies courses cultivate an awareness of different values, systems and societies and encourage students to develop a strong sense of perspective and curiosity in thinking, alongside the intercultural skills crucial to negotiating the relationship between different societies.

3.6 Area Studies courses also encourage students to develop skills in:

- reading and using materials both incisively and with sensitivity,
- comparing and contrasting ideas and concepts found within different disciplinary and geographical contexts
- thinking strategically and flexibly
- leading open-minded and empathetic negotiation
- identifying and resolving problems creatively

- communicating ideas with clarity, coherence and persuasiveness
- synthesising information, adopting critical appraisals and developing reasoned argument based on such appraisals
- selecting and applying appropriate methodologies and theories
- critically reflecting upon the scope and limitations of what has been ascertained and understood
- analysing issues proficiently in the light of evidence and argument
- working with a significant amount of independence, demonstrated in self-direction, self-management and intellectual initiative both in learning and studying and in time management
- presenting materials orally and visually in a clear and effective manner, using digital technologies where appropriate, and answering questions from an audience
- listening effectively and working creatively, flexibly and adaptively with others, including collegial and inclusive teamwork
- writing and thinking under pressure and meeting deadlines
- responding to feedback.

3.7 All of these skills have strong employer appeal in an increasingly interconnected world, creating graduates with strong intercultural and interpersonal competencies relevant to teamwork, diplomacy, policy engagement, negotiation and dispute resolution - particularly in transnational and international contexts. Area Studies graduates think both globally and locally, across borders and empathetically. They are thus highly skilled in responding to complex problem-solving.

Teaching and learning

Overview

3.8 Methods in teaching and learning vary, depending on the overall aims and objectives of the degree course, the mode of study (in-person or online, part or full time), the student's starting point, and whether a language is being studied. The latter may include features such as whether it has a standard written form or not, and whether it is written in alphabetical or other types of script.

3.9 Area Studies courses employ a wide variety of teaching approaches and share a number of teaching and learning methods with other humanities and social sciences disciplines, including:

- lectures, seminars, presentations, fieldwork, projects, study visits or placements and workshops
- directed study of a wide range of cultural forms, including literary and visual culture (novels, poems, plays, films, photography, graphic novels), audiovisual material, material culture, philosophical texts, and works of cultural, critical and social theory
- guided critical engagement with existing research from monographs and scholarly articles to blog posts and other online sources
- commentaries on extracts from texts or documents and other cultural products, for example, placing in context, interpreting in the light of knowledge of the historical period, identifying strategies of narration or providing linguistic analysis

- data collection and evaluation, for example, from guided use of library resources to independent use of subject bibliographies and online databases
- collecting, selecting, evaluating and presenting information or interpretations of material on a given topic
- peer-assisted learning and collaborative/pair/group work, for example, in the preparation of presentations
- discussion of prepared topics in seminar groups
- creative and/or reflective writing
- supervised independent research leading, at the later stages of a course, to the writing of a dissertation or other major project.

3.10 Language learning is a major component of many Area Studies courses. Teaching and learning methods include the use of specialist resources such as language laboratories and other digital aids to language learning. Language learning at all levels and in all languages is normally intensive, in terms of both teaching contact hours and deployment of a diverse range of learning resources. The need for concentrated and immersive study extends all the way through the language learning process, from initial engagement with a language to advanced levels and beyond. Those learning a language as beginners will typically require a greater number of contact hours and more time spent on independent learning, in addition to study abroad (where possible).

3.11 Language learning involves regular and extended contact with proficient users of the language, both for explicit teaching of language structures and for exposure to authentic examples of language use and culture. The latter requires frequent and easy access to target language material, including print, film, broadcast and online media.

Periods of residence abroad

3.12 Periods of residence abroad are generally an integral element of an Area Studies degree course, and may carry academic credit (where credit is used). The period varies from a week or two, to a semester, to an entire academic year according to the objectives of the individual course. The period of residence abroad may involve formal study in an overseas higher education provider, a teaching or work placement, and/or research for a project. By enabling engagement with other cultures and societies, a period abroad makes a significant contribution to students' engagement with their course and the development and enhancement of Area Studies knowledge, understanding and skills. It requires students to engage with environments with which they have varying levels of familiarity, and encourages intercultural awareness.

3.13 Courses vary in the activities that students are expected to carry out during their period of residence abroad, the ways in which their activities may be supported, monitored and assessed, and the ways in which this part of their learning are integrated into the overall objectives of the course.

3.14 Residence abroad will typically:

- optimise opportunities for the development of insights into a target society and culture
- encourage academic and personal development through extended contact with a specific sociocultural environment
- develop intercultural understanding and ethical awareness

- provide vocationally oriented experiences, where appropriate to the placement and degree course
- enhance employability
- in language-based Area Studies, optimise opportunities for the development of linguistic progress through contact with competent speakers of the target language(s)
- in language-based Area Studies, enable students to reflect on and develop their own language learning skills and techniques.

3.15 Residence abroad is an opportunity to reflect on and develop the intercultural awareness of students and staff. Ethics and risk assessments undertaken prior to the period of residence abroad enable it to be planned and conducted in a way that is ethical, responsible, inclusive and safe for students, staff, visited communities and all other stakeholders. Inclusivity impact assessments help reveal where resourcing may be needed to ensure that all students can participate fully in international opportunities.

3.16 Consideration of the sustainability of a period of residence abroad enables it to contribute to institutional, national and global strategic priorities for sustainable development. Carbon audits can aid evaluation of the environmental impact of a period of residence abroad, its sustainability and its carbon footprint. Sustainable programme learning outcomes balance the environmental costs with the learning, transferable skills, development of social and cultural capital and other educational benefits of the period spent abroad.

3.17 As noted in paragraph 1.18, where students are not required or are unable to undertake a period of residence abroad, the objectives of the Area Studies degree may be achieved by a variety of other methods, including directed intensive language study during vacations, and providing contact with the target linguistic and cultural environment through local placements, engagement activities, digital resources, virtual mobility and virtual residencies.

Assessment

3.18 Assessment and feedback are an integral part of successful course design and delivery. Assessments provide a sense-check on learning and empower students to reflect critically on their own learning and abilities. They are one of the central means through which students engage in their studies and learn about the subject matter. Assessment allows students to show they have met the learning outcomes of their courses. In addition, assessments can focus on the development of certain skills and competences related to personal development, citizenship and employability. The feedback students receive on assessments (formative and summative) is central to their learning, development and improved performance in subsequent tasks.

3.19 In Area Studies, a variety of assessments is employed. Diversity and plurality in assessment (see paragraphs 1.14-1.16) provides students with an opportunity to engage in and demonstrate a full range of abilities, and to engage with the norms of a variety of disciplines. Variety in assessment enables students from diverse backgrounds to show what they have learnt and what they can do.

3.20 While all forms of assessment encourage students to engage with the subject, some assessments focus on the development of key competencies, whereas others allow students to explore themes or approaches which concern them personally bringing their knowledge, understanding and experiences to the fore. For example:

- assessments which enable students to demonstrate their understanding of the subject and ability to develop critical analyses. These may include essays, examinations, quizzes and book reviews
- assessments which encourage students to build their capacity for independent research, thinking and problem solving, through the design of an independent research project, selection of an appropriate methodology, and writing up of results. These may include dissertations, research reports and extended essays
- assessments which enable students to explore areas of personal interest. These may include blog posts, case studies, essays, posters and podcasts
- assessments which develop students' ability to select, manage, investigate, evaluate and present their findings of a variety of forms of information. These may include statistical analyses, reports and infographics
- assessments which encourage students to develop and improve their communication skills for diverse audiences. These may include presentations, podcasts, posters, blogs, video film recordings or vlogs, websites and other multimedia forms of presentation
- applied assessments which reflect possible careers related to Area Studies, thus developing students' transferable skills. These may include briefing papers, speeches and policy reports, podcasts, museum exhibits and other public engagement-related assessments
- assessments which encourage students to critically reflect on their knowledge, skills and personal development. These may include learning journals and self-reflective exercises
- assessments which relate to forms of experiential learning, such as placements or simulations. These may include reflective reports or diaries
- assessments which enable students to work together as part of a team. These may include group projects, presentations and reports
- for courses with language elements, assessments which relate to core skills of speaking, writing, reading and listening. These may include translations and comprehension, as part of written, oral and/or aural examinations.

3.21 Feedback is an essential part of assessment. Students receive constructive feedback throughout their studies, with particular attention paid to building skills of self-reflection and self-criticality. Given the multi and interdisciplinary nature of Area Studies and the ways in which core concepts are contested, an appreciation of the multiple approaches that may be taken to any given question is an intrinsic part of any feedback process. Feedback is provided through various mechanisms, including written and spoken comments, group discussion and technology-aided systems, peer and self-assessment.

3.22 Feedback is both formative and summative. Formative feedback has a developmental purpose, designed to help learners learn more effectively by giving them feedback on their performance and how it can be improved and/or maintained. It helps them evaluate their progress and identify how they can improve further. It is designed to 'feed forward' and is thus often used on pieces of work for which students receive no formal grade, to allow them to explore and develop ideas and skills in a 'risk-free' context. Reflective practice by students sometimes contributes to formative assessment. Summative feedback is used to indicate the extent of a learner's success in meeting the assessment criteria that gauge the intended learning outcomes of a module or course. Formative feedback is about informing the learning process, while summative feedback tends to provide a comment and evaluation on how students have done.

3.23 Artificial intelligence (AI) offers Area Studies as many opportunities as it does challenges. The use of 'new generative' AI tools (such as large language models) and other new technologies needs to be carefully considered in terms of their use and impact on the study of interdisciplinary topics and on language acquisition, as tools for students to develop material in a range of forms, and as a subject of study in and of themselves. Because AI models capture the semantic and textual world they are trained on, including its biases and contradictions they can selectively reflect a version of reality and thus necessitate transparency and openness in their use so that judgements can be made on their appropriate use in the various pedagogical contexts of Area Studies. It is important to recognise that AI also necessitates careful design of assessment by instructors to avoid overuse, or illegitimate use, of these tools.

4 Benchmark standards

Introduction

4.1 This Subject Benchmark Statement sets out the minimum threshold standards that a student will have demonstrated when they are awarded an honours degree in Area Studies. It also sets out standards for typical and excellent levels of achievement. Demonstrating these standards over time will show that a student has achieved the range of knowledge, understanding and skills expected of graduates in Area Studies.

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

4.3 The 'threshold' standard is the minimally acceptable attainment of a bachelor's degree with honours graduate. The standard achieved by the majority of honours graduates is defined as the 'typical' standard. The 'excellent' standard achieved by a minority of honours graduates is defined as being able to meet all the 'threshold' and 'typical' standards to a high level. Graduates at all three levels show knowledge and understanding of their area. Those at 'threshold' level demonstrate this by basic presentation of information, evidence and argument. Graduates at 'typical' level show abilities to evaluate information independently, to assess evidence critically, and to develop an argument individually. Graduates at 'excellent' level demonstrate a higher level of scholarly knowledge, with ability to conduct independent and original research on the area, and/or to contribute to the development of new knowledge and perspectives in the field.

4.4 These are general benchmark standards for an undergraduate degree in Area Studies, and the specific benchmark standards for sub-areas depends on the particular area(s) and context(s) being studied, as well as on the goals and objectives of the course or curriculum set out by different institutions. Area Studies graduates will also have the skill to apply interdisciplinary approaches and methods to the study of the area.

Threshold level

- Successful completion of courses that provide a fundamental and general overview of the geography, history, culture and society of a particular area or region.
- Ability to identify key features and characteristics of the area, and to analyse fundamental issues and challenges facing the area from multiple perspectives.
- Familiarity with primary sources and secondary literature on the area, and ability to summarise and evaluate their relevance and credibility.
- For courses which include a language element, fundamental competence in reading, writing and speaking a language(s) relevant to the area, and ability to communicate basic information and ideas.

Typical level

- Successful completion of courses that deepen knowledge of the geography, history, culture and society of a particular area or region, and provide opportunities for specialisation and research.

- Ability to critically analyse and assess the complexity and diversity of the area, and to recognise the interconnections among different aspects of the area.
- Competence in applying theoretical frameworks and methods from a range of disciplines to the study of the area, and ability to apply them to specific cases and contexts.
- For courses which include a language element, proficiency in reading, writing and speaking a language(s) relevant to the area, and ability to use it to access and communicate complex information and ideas.

Excellent level

- Successful completion of courses that enable original independent research and scholarship on the geography, history, culture and society of a particular area or region, and demonstrate expertise and scholarly attainments in specialised sub-fields or topics within the area.
- Ability to use a range of primary and secondary sources, and/or to contribute to the development of new knowledge and perspectives in the field.
- Skill in applying interdisciplinary approaches and methods to the study of the area.
- For courses which include a language element, high level of proficiency in reading, writing and speaking a language(s) relevant to the area, and ability to engage in sophisticated and nuanced discourse with proficient speakers of the language(s).

Benchmark standards for postgraduate degrees

4.5 The following describes the threshold standards for a postgraduate degree in Area Studies, which build on those for a bachelor's degree with honours. The holder of a master's degree in Area Studies should be able to demonstrate:

- a deep specialist knowledge based in independent research and scholarship on the geography, history, culture and society of a particular area or region
- strong expertise and scholarly attainment in specialised sub-fields or topics within the area
- strong levels of engagement and familiarity with recent and current research in the area, and effective synthesis of multi and interdisciplinary sources, approaches and methods
- high potential to contribute to the development of new knowledge and perspectives in the field
- the abilities and skills necessary to devise, plan, carry out and produce an extended thesis, report or research project in the area
- for courses which include a language element, expertise in reading, writing and speaking a language(s) relevant to the area.

5 List of references and further resources

Disabled Students Commission

www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/disability-equality-higher-education/disabled-students-commission

QAA The UK Quality Code for Higher Education

www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code

QAA (2018) Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education: Guidance for UK Higher Education Providers

www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/enterprise-and-entrepreneurship-education

QAA (2024)

www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/qualifications-frameworks

QAA and Advance HE (2021) Education for Sustainable Development Guidance

www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/education-for-sustainable-development

QAA (2018) Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education: Guidance for UK Higher Education Providers

www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/enterprise-and-entrepreneurship-education

QAA (2022) Glossary

www.qaa.ac.uk/glossary

QAA, Quality Enhancement Framework (Scotland)

www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework

QAA (2021) Quality Enhancement Review (Wales)

www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-enhancement-review

QAA (2018) Quality Code Advice and Guidance

www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/advice-and-guidance

UNESCO (2020) Education for Sustainability: A Roadmap

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802>

United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

6 Membership of the Advisory Group

Membership of the Advisory Group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Area Studies 2024

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Professor Zahia Smail Salhi (Deputy Chair)	The University of Manchester
Professor Tony Chafer	University of Portsmouth
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Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Area Studies 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 a member of the review group of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Area Studies from 2016.

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