



**English Language**

**Subject benchmark statement**

**June 2011**



# English Language Benchmark Statement

## 1. Foreword

In March 2010 Professor Joan Beal organised a workshop at the University of Sheffield entitled “What is an English-Language degree?”. The workshop was sponsored jointly by the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies and the English Subject Centre. The workshop responded to the increasing popularity of undergraduate degrees in English Language and to a recognition that a public statement about the nature and content of such degrees would be timely. Although such degrees have multiplied recently, their scope and nature are not always clear. Are they primarily a continuation of the A-level in English Language (which provides most, but not all, the students), or are they primarily modifications of existing degree courses – an English degree specialising in language or a Linguistics degree specialising in English?

A group of participants in the Sheffield meeting decided that it would be helpful to have a statement about the nature of these degrees agreed by those who currently offered degrees in English Language. Such a statement would be helpful for a number of constituencies:

- school teachers who advise school-leavers on the choice of university degree courses.
- academics considering the introduction of a new degree in English Language.
- academics wishing to review an existing English-Language degree course.
- employers who wish to understand an applicant’s programme of English-Language study in greater detail.

The obvious model for the statement was the typical ‘benchmark statement’ that had been initiated and funded by QAA, and especially the statements for English and for Linguistics (which can be found at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/default.asp>). Unfortunately, the QAA no longer commissions new statements, but academics are, of course, free to produce their own informal statements; a particularly relevant example is the statement for Creative Writing (<http://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/research.html>). This is the model that the group decided to aim for, so the following is a statement which has no official status, but which does reflect the views of a wide range of academics involved in English-Language degree courses.

Dr Catherine Watts coordinated the working group which eventually produced this document, with administrative support from the English Subject Centre. The group’s remit was to produce a statement for English Language modelled on the existing statements for English, Linguistics and Creative Writing. The members of the group are listed as an appendix at the end. The group met once (in November 2010), but otherwise conducted its business by email. This statement was agreed by all members of the group in June 2011.

The aim of the working group was, at all times, to be inclusive rather than exclusive: to define the range of activities and attitudes to be found within existing degrees in English Language, rather than to specify a minimum core of content that might disqualify some existing degrees. The fact is that existing courses have different but complementary roots, some in linguistics, others in literature; and that language can be studied in many different ways, with different degrees of focus on its structure or on its use. This document is a testament to the richness of the subject area and to the diversity of approaches already found in teaching as well as in research.

## **2. Defining principles**

2.1 The subject of English Language draws on concepts from a range of academic areas including Linguistics, Literature, Media and Communication, but its object of study is English. Programmes in English Language cover a range of topics and individual programmes manage the balance between them differently. Students study the linguistic systems underlying English, as well as language in use and the relationship between language and context, the society and the individual. They typically study both written and spoken language, with multimodal texts also a focus on some programmes. English may be studied in its cultural, contemporary and historical background; it may be related to literary texts, everyday discourse, and the structure of languages other than English. Descriptive analysis will be combined with more critical and theoretical work which develops students' understanding of texts and/or language systems.

2.2 English-Language degrees teach a range of analytical techniques such as:

- detailed study of samples of text in terms of analytical frameworks ranging from segmental phonetics to the structure and nature of discourses.
- evaluation of texts in relation to their purposes and uses, including literary, communicative, sociological and ideological evaluations.
- analysis of underlying language systems at all levels of language, from phonetic to semantic.

2.3 English-Language degrees also include:

- knowledge of historical, geographical and social variations.
- awareness of theoretical issues in neighbouring disciplines, including psychology, sociology, biology and computing, and their application to the study of English.

2.4 English Language provides a grounding for careers requiring:

- advanced written and spoken communication skills, such as management, the media, publishing.
- skills in processing information, such as journalism, the law.
- subject-specific knowledge, such as teaching, language therapy, forensic linguistics.

### **3. The nature and scope of English Language**

3.1 English Language is concerned with the structure and use of varieties of English across the world, including the study of the historical development of those varieties.

3.2 English Language is offered in both single-honours and combined- or joint-honours programmes. Combined- and joint-honours students are rarely taught or assessed separately from their single-honours peers at the level of the module. This subject benchmark statement therefore applies to all students taking a significant proportion of English-Language modules as part of their degree programme.

3.3 In its intellectual character and academic practice, HE English Language is a continually evolving discipline which responds to developments in knowledge, theory and technology. It encourages the study of the English language as it is spoken and written across the world. Central to this is the study of all text types, eg spoken, written and multimodal, and it may also include aspects of the subject 'creative writing'.

3.4 The breadth of the combination of degrees offering English Language will inevitably influence the approach taken to the study of English Language and thus the flavour of the individual degree programmes. Nonetheless, it is accepted that there are common areas of knowledge and skills and that students should be able to situate any chosen specialisms within a wider understanding of the discipline concerned. Examples of common areas of knowledge and skills include:

- the structure and use of geographical, social and historical varieties of English.
- skills shared with General Linguistics in data collection and analysis;
- critical skills shared with Literature, Media Studies and Anthropology in how discourses represent the world around us.
- awareness shared with Creative Writing courses of the implications of language choices and of the cultural, literary and historical context in which the texts were produced.

3.5 As mentioned in 3.1 above the responsive nature of the discipline and its intellectual range and diversity of approach open it up to the knowledge and procedures of other subjects. English Language encourages inter- and multidisciplinary perspectives. Multidisciplinary work consists of the study in parallel of two or more subjects which may have little or no formal relationship. Interdisciplinary study seeks a more active integration between subject areas through, for example, the pursuit of a theme from different perspectives (eg the representation of gender), the joint study of a particular topic, period or area (eg renaissance studies), or in the joint study of cognate disciplines with the provision of bridging courses (e.g. English Language and Philosophy).

3.6 A typical English-Language programme does not assume any particular prior academic qualifications so it caters for many different levels and kinds of preparation among incoming students. What all students have in common is a command of English and a desire to know more about it, so it is important to ensure that an

English-Language programme provides the expected opportunities for developing not only students' own language skills, but also their language awareness.

## **4. Subject knowledge and skills**

### **Subject knowledge**

4.1 While English Language incorporates different types of degree programmes with distinctive configurations, these share a focus on the form and function of English. Whilst emphasis given to particular aspects of subject knowledge will vary from institution to institution and from programme to programme, graduates who have studied English Language as a significant component of their degree will typically be able to demonstrate awareness of most of the following:

- the internal structure of contemporary English, including knowledge of its phonetics and phonology (sound system), morphology, syntax, semantics, lexis and pragmatics;
- some of the main ways of analysing English text and discourse, including for example conversation analysis, aspects of stylistics, semiotics and discourse analysis (including critical discourse analysis);
- some of the main theories of meaning and how meanings are influenced by context and negotiated by speakers;
- the history of English, including its ongoing development;
- the relationship between English and other languages;
- key geographical and social determinants of variation in English, including a number of the main regional varieties of English in the British Isles and global varieties of English, as appropriate;
- the role of language within the broader field of communication, including its role in constructing individual and group identities;
- how language produces and reflects cultural change and difference;
- the implications of language choices, for example in constructing particular registers and styles;
- some of the main theories and fields of investigation concerning the broader human language faculty, which may include its relationship to animal communication systems, language evolution, the acquisition of language by children, second language acquisition, language processing, the language arts, language pathology and the influence of language on mental representation;
- how the analyses sketched above are applied in a variety of contexts such as education, business, the law, performance arts, intercultural negotiations, politics and the media.

### **Subject-specific skills**

4.2 Graduates who have studied English Language as a significant component of their degree will have acquired a range of complementary analytical, critical and linguistic skills. Individual degree programmes will choose to place the emphasis on developing particular abilities and skills. The following list of subject-specific skills is

intended to provide a broad framework for articulating the outcomes of individual programmes:

- the ability to formulate a hypothesis, gather evidence, and construct an acceptable argument within the study of English Language.
- knowledge of the metalanguage appropriate for the discipline and the ability to use correctly a recognized formal terminology.
- critical skills in the close reading, description, analysis, or production of texts or discourses.
- ability to articulate knowledge and understanding of texts, concepts and theories relating to English and to the language faculty more broadly.
- responsiveness to the central role of language in the creation of meaning and a sensitivity to the affective power of language.
- awareness of the variety of Englishes in the world and intercultural awareness.

## **Generic and transferable skills**

4.3 Graduates who have studied English Language as a significant component of an honours degree will have acquired the following key transferable and cognitive skills:

- advanced literacy and communication skills and the ability to apply these in appropriate contexts, including the ability to construct and present coherent, concise and sustained arguments.
- competence in the planning and execution of presentations, project reports, essays and other formal writing.
- the ability to abstract and synthesize information, and to organize the results appropriately.
- the ability to analyse data, and to express the results of that analysis cogently and concisely.
- the ability to draft and redraft texts to achieve clarity of expression and exposition, and to produce a register and style appropriate to the context.
- the ability to assess the merits and demerits of contrasting theories and explanations, including those of other disciplines.
- the ability to think and reason critically, to evaluate evidence and argumentation, and to form a critical judgement of one's own work as well as the work of others, both in academic and non-academic domains.
- the ability to recognize problems and to develop problem-solving strategies.
- the ability to acquire complex data and information of diverse kinds from a variety of sources, including libraries, the internet, corpora, independent fieldwork and data collection.
- bibliographic skills appropriate to the discipline, including accurate citation of sources and consistent use of conventions in the presentation of professional and scholarly work.
- skills in accessing and manipulating data electronically, as well as a broad familiarity with information technology resources.
- effective time management and organizational skills, including the ability to work to a deadline and to handle a number of distinct projects simultaneously.

## **5. Teaching, learning and assessment**

### **General**

5.1 Programmes in English Language should articulate principles of coherent and progressive development across the curricular provision and the learning experience of students. Because English Language programmes justifiably have differences in their specialisms and emphases, it is particularly important that students are fully informed of those distinctive features at the outset, and that assessment criteria are explicitly linked to programme outcomes.

### **Teaching and learning**

5.2 Despite the different emphases of particular English Language programmes, all entrants to programmes share the experience of being language learners and users. It is therefore a significant strength of English Language programmes to be able to draw on students' experiences and important that providers take opportunities to do so. English Language programmes are particularly well placed to enable students to collect data and to be active researchers from the outset. Where students have particular expertise and knowledge (for example, of different languages) or particular interests and enthusiasms (for example, in new communication technologies) they should be encouraged to take the lead in researching language in these contexts and to inform others of their findings. Students should be given the opportunity to pursue original thought and ideas, and encouraged to question received opinion.

5.3 Ways in which teaching and learning may be organised include the lecture, seminar, tutorial, workshop, personal supervision and various modes of supported independent study, including online environments. Other appropriate formats in which English Language can be explored include a workplace context. Learning strategies should offer a balance between information transmission and opportunities for active assimilation, application, questioning, debate and critical reflection. Materials for study are likely to encompass a wide variety of sources, including written documents of all kinds, spoken data, language corpora, media texts, and online sites where hybrid communication operates multimodally as new technologies converge. This wide variety of teaching and learning methods and materials is important in order to maximise student motivation and involvement. The emphasis on students' self-direction and personal responsibility will progressively increase in the teaching and learning strategies utilised. The ongoing communicative competencies among students will form part of this process.

5.4 Rich opportunities for language study and research exist in real-world contexts such as workplaces, and English Language programmes can provide structured ways for students to enhance their employability skills by researching language-at-work. Language issues are present in every workplace and can be meaningfully studied towards an outcome beneficial to employers as well as to the students themselves and their programmes. For example, students intending to teach could study teacher-pupil interactions, the language environment of classrooms, or the way in which displays in school entrances or the front pages of their websites convey impressions of

institutional values and priorities. Given the interest that English Language has for mature students, studying language issues in the workplace can add an additional dimension of professional development. These types of study will necessarily involve students in thinking about and planning for ethical approaches to research, which is of course a crucial element of research methods training.

## **Assessment**

5.5 The assessment of students should be explicitly linked to the learning processes and outcomes of their degree programmes, which should recognise that assessment significantly influences how and what students learn. Assessment inheres in and informs the learning process: it is formative and diagnostic as well as summative and evaluative, and the process should provide students with constructive feedback. Assessment criteria should be specified in relation to the programme, unit or module as appropriate and specific variations, for example, in relation to oral assessment or work-related reports, should be made explicit.

5.6 English Language lends itself to the use of varied forms of assessment, such as the following (not a definitive list):

- Discursive essays.
- Data analysis of various kinds.
- Data collection.
- Presentations.
- Individual and group project reports.
- Portfolios of work.
- Examinations (including pre-release or take-away formats).
- Various forms of online engagement, for example discussion forums, blogs, wikis.
- Tasks aimed at the development of specific skills (such as literature searches, ICT tasks).
- Reflective journals.
- Creative or critical work which answers a specific commission.
- Workshop assignments such as phonetics mini-tests.
- Dissertations.

5.7 As in any other subject, since assessment is not only evaluative, but also formative and diagnostic, students should be provided where appropriate with constructive feedback. The rationale for assessment on programmes in English Language should be clearly presented to students, and there should be clear, explicit assessment criteria for all forms of assessment.

5.8 Overall, assessment in English Language will reward achievement in the following areas at distinguishable levels:

- breadth and depth of subject knowledge (including relevant contextual knowledge) and the demonstration of powers of textual analysis, and/or an informed ability to evaluate and reflect upon linguistic and stylistic choices.

- the management of discursive analysis and argument, including the awareness of alternative or contextualising lines of argument.
- rhetorical strategies which demonstrate the convincing deployment and evaluation of evidence.
- fluent and effective communication of ideas, and sophisticated writing skills.
- independence of mind and originality of approach in interpretative and written practice.
- critical acumen.
- informed engagement with scholarly debates.

### **Appendix: members of the working group**

- Professor Joan Beal (University of Sheffield)
- Dr Carolin Esser (University of Winchester)
- Dr Jonathan Gibson (English Subject Centre)
- Professor Angela Goddard (York St John University)
- Dr David Hornsby (University of Kent)
- Professor Richard Hudson (UCL, Chair)
- Professor Susan Hunston (University of Birmingham)
- Professor Ben Knights (English Subject Centre and Royal Holloway College)
- Dr Sarah Rule (LLAS Subject Centre)
- Dr Nicola Schmidt-Renfree (University of Kent)
- Professor Maggie Tallerman (Newcastle University)
- Professor Jeanine Treffers-Daller (University of Reading)
- Dr Graeme Trousdale (University of Edinburgh)
- Ms Sarah Varney-Burch (University of Brighton)
- Dr Catherine Watts (University of Brighton)