

# How are universities protecting degree standards?

Achieving a degree reflects years of hard work, resilience, and dedication. However, since the early 2000s, a steady increase in the proportion of first and 2:1 awards has risked undermining the value of a degree, with concerns about potential grade inflation. Since 2019, universities have been working to make sure all students can take pride in their achievements.

## Why has there been an increase in firsts and 2:1s?

Some of the increases in firsts and 2:1s reflect genuine student improvements and better teaching methods and assessment. It would be wrong to artificially cap results. But where providers can't easily explain the increases, they should look at their data and policies to understand and then – if necessary – reduce the trend.

We can't ignore the increase from 61% to 82% in upper awards between 2006–07 and 2019–20. The trend has not all been upwards though. In 2018–19 the proportion of upper awards began to level off at 76%, with no increase from the previous year.

## How has the sector responded?

### Making a commitment

In 2019, the [UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment \(UKSCQA\)](#) published a [statement of intent](#) to protect confidence in the value of degrees. UKSCQA provides sector-led oversight of higher education quality assessment arrangements by bringing together partners from across the UK.

Under UKSCQA, work began to:

- understand student outcomes data
- describe the classification system
- improve how providers calculate degrees
- support external scrutiny

## **Workshops to support universities**

Since 2019, we have worked closely with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to deliver workshops across the sector. The workshops have helped to put the commitments of the statement of intent in place. Since 2020, QAA has delivered 19 workshops reaching 777 attendees. This high level of engagement shows the importance being placed on this work.

## **What progress has been made?**

We carried out a progress review in 2020 and even in just one year, significant activity had happened across the sector. As we begin 2022, 47% of providers believe they are in a stronger place to protect degree standards than in 2019. However, a further 47% see themselves in a similar position to 2019, suggesting there is more to do to support this work and understand and tackle unexplained grade inflation.

### **How has Covid-19 affected progress?**

Covid-19 disrupted the progress universities were making and in 2019–20 we saw a leap of 6 percentage points in first and 2:1 awards. Many providers changed their teaching, learning and assessment and introduced safety net policies to respond to the needs of their students. The changes recognised students' level of achievement before the pandemic and accounted for the last-minute disruption to their learning.

Our findings on degree classifications in 2019–20 show that while the pandemic tested the resilience of degree standards, providers met this challenge by putting in place strong rules to protect standards.

However, the pandemic's impact will be felt by future students who have studied under exceptional circumstances and universities will continue to monitor this.

# Our survey

We ran a survey and heard from 44 providers. We found out what actions they are taking and the progress they are making across UKSCQA's four commitments.

We found that the key developments the sector has made across the four commitments are:

1. Universities in England and Wales now publish degree outcome statements that are publicly available.
2. Universities are reviewing their degree algorithms using the new UKSCQA principles.
3. There are shared degree classification descriptors for the sector, helping to provide students with a clear summary of the standard to reach for each classification (eg 2:1, first).
4. Under the direction of UUK and Guild HE, QAA is currently working to strengthen the external examining system.

## 1. Publishing degree outcome statements

Providers in England and Wales now publish degree outcome statements. The short documents follow internal reviews within each provider. 113 degree outcomes statements have been published since 2019, which is a major injection of evidence into the sector.

### What do the statements do?

The statements:

- review trends over several years
- bring together all the tools providers use to protect degree standards – such as the latest data and policies
- outline activities identified by providers on what more they can do
- must have approval from the provider's governance board, giving scrutiny at the highest level

- are publicly available so universities are transparent about their practices

### What actions are in the statements?

While not required, 81% of recently surveyed providers set actions in their statements. Most commonly to:

- **Review their degree algorithm design against the newly published principles.** For example, providers have looked at the rules around the grade borderlines, reduced the use of multiple algorithms and limited discounting (ignoring lower grades). Providers have also taken steps to explain how the algorithm works through student-centred resources such as online calculators.
- **Analyse demographics or subject areas.** This is to better understand differences in degree outcomes. From this, the statements have prompted conversations within departments on assessment design.
- **Look at the impact of Covid-19.** For example, looking at the impact of temporary policies and capture lessons from the pandemic, such as the closing of awarding gaps.
- **Expand the responsibility of external examiners to comment on degree standards over time.** We are also seeing more providers appoint chief or principal external examiners to oversee standards across the whole institution.

### What next?

We have asked providers to update their statements annually with the latest data and progress on actions. From the providers we spoke to, 95% will update their statements in 2022 to reflect outcomes in the 2020–21 academic year.

We are committed to working with GuildHE and QAA to continue to receive feedback on the usefulness of the statements and any support that will help providers engage with them better.

In Scotland, universities review degree outcomes as part of programme reviews. In addition, QAA Scotland staff meet each Scottish institution annually to discuss quality, standards and education enhancement.

## 2. Uncovering how providers calculate degree results

Since 2020 ‘algorithm’ has become a watchword for students and those working in education. A degree algorithm in higher education refers to a set of rules which bring together the marks of a student into a degree result. Creating an algorithm requires careful consideration and should have a rationale based on assessment expertise.

Research from [2017](#) and [2020](#) showed the wide range of algorithm practice across institutions, which raised questions about the comparability of qualifications. To help with consistency UKSCQA published the first-ever UK-wide set of [principles for effective degree algorithm design](#) in July 2020. Our survey of providers suggests 84% of the sector have or will engage with the principles as they review their practices.

### What do the principles do?

The principles hold providers to a strong set of obligations that make sure a student’s grade is a reliable summary of their performance. The principles have helped produce algorithms that are consistent, transparent and reliable.

### What are providers doing?

We are seeing action to:

- **Look at the combined impact of an algorithm.** This is to ensure parts do not overly reinforce each other. For example, this could happen where the final level of a student’s study is accounted for multiple times by weighting more heavily on the final year, discounting marks from previous years, and uplifting students on the borderline.
- **Tighten borderline policies to protect boundaries.** For example, ensuring that a 2:1 is typically 60–69 or a 2:2 50–59 (in the conventional 0–100 grading approach).
- **Explain the algorithm to students.** This has proved valuable where the design of algorithms differs across different subject areas.

### What next?

The pandemic has meant many universities had to put their algorithm reviews on hold. This is because emergency changes needed to be introduced. We understand that plans are now back on track and expect more action on this in the future.

### **3. Building a shared understanding of classifications**

When is a first a first or a 2:2 a 2:2? Assessing academic work should always fall to the judgement of academic experts. However, to help, UKSCQA has published degree classification descriptors. The descriptors give students, for the first time, a clear summary of what each classification means. For example, it describes what level of ‘knowledge and understanding’ or ‘practical skills’ is needed for a 2:1, and how this differs from a 2:2.

#### **How do the descriptors work?**

The descriptors work alongside other frameworks such as FHEQ, FQHEIS and subject benchmark statements. Their status as a sector-owned reference point is important. They are not a strict formula – this would stifle the freedom of providers to innovate their assessment practice. Instead, they should be seen as a guide to help with transparency and consistency.

#### **What are providers doing?**

Feedback suggests that 80% of institutions are using or will use the standards. We are seeing the descriptors used in the following ways:

- To help existing institution-level or subject-level descriptors align more with the sector ones.
- Support training and development for academics and external examiners. This enables the descriptors to support consistent marking judgements and exam committees.
- Embed the descriptors from the course approval stage through to assessment design, marking practice and to the student receiving their result.

#### **What next?**

For providers in England, the Office for Students (OfS) has consulted on making the descriptors a sector-recognised standard. It intends to use them to challenge providers where they have concerns about degree standards. Their status as a reference point needs to be protected, but going forward, they will be a useful addition to how quality and standards are protected in England.

## 4. Improving external scrutiny

Independent scrutiny is a cornerstone of protecting degree standards. The external examiner system carries out this function, but our research suggests more can be done. Multiple reviews of the external examiner system over the years haven't brought about the changes needed for it to be as effective as it could be.

### How can external examiners help protect standards?

We need a strong external examiner system that can support providers to make further changes to learning in the post-pandemic environment. The external examiner system must empower examiners to call out any concerns they have about degree standards.

### What are providers doing?

We are seeing providers expand the role of external examiners. This includes taking on responsibilities related to degree standards, approving degree outcomes statements and examining data in more detail.

### What next?

In August 2021, along with GuildHE, we asked QAA to launch work to strengthen the external examining system. QAA have formed an advisory group and kick-started a series of engagements with the sector. From this, they will develop a series of principles which will build a shared understanding of the external examiner role.

Within this work, we also want to consider where external examiners have a role in addressing the challenges of grade inflation.

## What does the future hold?

Since 2019, there has been a step change in how we think about degree standards. However, the nature of these changes means it will take time to see results – especially because the pandemic has temporarily disrupted progress.

This is a long term effort, but providers are acting now to build confidence in the system. We will continue to monitor progress and provide further guidance and support to the sector where needed.

In our first progress review, we set out what else the sector can do in the future, such as:

- enhancing internal quality assurance processes;
- empowering governing bodies to act on standards;
- engaging with league table compilers on the use of a ‘good degrees’ metric;
- and developing guidance on quality and standards within teaching partnerships, all while continuing to raise the statement of intent’s profile within and beyond the sector.

## **Case studies**

### **Arts University Bournemouth (AUB)**

AUB reviewed its degree algorithm against the principles and examined the data to ensure changes didn’t disadvantage particular groups. It noted some areas where its approach didn’t align, and made minor changes which would meet the principles without undermining the intention of their algorithm. The new algorithm will be brought in for students enrolling in 2022.

### **Hartpury University**

As a young university, Hartpury University chose to publish a degree outcomes statement as part of its ongoing work to ensure awards reflect industry and professional standards and expectations. The university monitors achievement annually, at programme and department level, through an achievement report and a quality report through its committee and governance structure. It makes evidence-informed decisions about how to amend and enforce its academic regulations. The statement of intent and connected research has helped the university contextualise its practice with other providers. This led to more confident decision-making when enacting regulations during the Covid-19 pandemic.



## **Nottingham Trent University (NTU)**

Over the last few years, NTU has developed its grade-based assessment framework in three key ways. First, the university has enhanced the rigour of the degree algorithm. A student is awarded a first if they have performed at a first-class standard on the majority of their modules.

Second, different award boards had historically used different variations of the rules on borderline classifications to enable students with profiles at the top of a classification band to achieve a higher classification. There is no longer any exam board discretion to do this.

Third, NTU has shifted to a 'linear' system of numbers that stand in for each grade (0-16, instead of 0-100). In the 0-100 (non-linear) system some students benefit from the inflationary effects of the traditional '70-100' first-class range. This range is used in different ways across the sector and is an important factor in any analysis of grade inflation.

## **University College of Estate Management (UCEM)**

Following the publication of the paper on algorithm principles, UCEM undertook a review of how its practice aligns with each of the principles. The exercise reassured UCEM's quality standards and enhancement committee that its practice aligns with the principles. It also assured UCEM that its choice of algorithm model and approach to discounting and classification at borderline are all appropriate.

The review recommended areas for improvement, including committing to a standard five-yearly cycle of algorithm review and providing a summary within the student handbook of how marks will be used to classify a degree and why this approach is right for UCEM programmes.

## **University of Chichester**

There is surprisingly little research on exit velocity in degree algorithms – where the weight is placed on a student's marks later on in their degree. The University of Chichester wanted to understand this more. Previous research shows that of 100 responding institutions, 87 used exit velocity in their algorithm for calculating degree classification. The standard definition is based on a belief that student marks generally improve from year two to year three. Data from 970 students completing in

2019–20 showed that the level 6 mark was, on average, higher by just 2.6% for an individual student. Exit velocity was therefore unlikely to change a student’s classification, unless at the boundary. Interestingly, the data showed differences across academic areas, leading us to conclude that further analysis is needed. You can read more about this work on [Wonkhe](#).

## **University of Exeter**

In December 2020, following an in-depth review of the degree classifications awarded to its graduates, the University of Exeter published its first degree outcomes statement.

During the 2020–21 academic year, the university also undertook [research and analysis](#) to determine the impact on degree outcomes of its no detriment policy brought in during the pandemic. The policy introduced a ‘safety net’ for individual students by calculating a benchmark based on their assessment and examination grades before the pandemic. The university found that most students did not need to make use of the ‘safety net’, as they achieved a higher final credit-weighted stage mean. For those that did rely on their benchmark, just 1.4% of UK domiciled final year students saw a change in their degree classification. The policy achieved its aim as students more likely to have been impacted socially and economically by the pandemic benefitted the most.

## **University of Worcester**

The University of Worcester has taken several steps in response to the statement of intent. The university updated its generic grade descriptors to align with the classification descriptors. The descriptors inform a review of local grading criteria. Through this process, the university gained a greater awareness of the demands on academic staff when writing and navigating grade descriptors and recognised that no one size fits all. The university’s classification method was mapped against the algorithm principles and it’s currently reviewing revisions to the method.