

## Degree Outcomes Statement

### 1 Institutional degree classification profile

The University of Worcester has seen a 5 percentage point increase in the proportion of first class Honours degrees awarded over the last 5 years, and a 2.2 percentage point increase in the proportion of 1 and 2:1 degrees over the same period. The proportions of both decreased slightly in the 2018/19 academic year. The profile for each of the 5 years can be seen in the table below.

Academic Year	14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19
Proportion of First Class degrees (%)	15.1	19.2	20.7	21.9	20.5
Proportion of First/Upper Second Class degrees (%)	70.3	67.9	70.3	70.7	68.7

[Data taken from workbooks associated with OfS publication 2020.52](#)

This increase in 1 and 2:1 degree classifications coincides with a move on the part of the University to become more selective in student recruitment, whilst also strengthening its commitment to widening participation in a period of growth. Thus, over the period between 2010/11 and 2017/18 the number of University graduates increased by over 60% and they were more highly qualified in terms of average UCAS points on entry (UCAS tariff points averaged 257 in 2010; 303 in 2016<sup>1</sup>).

Since December 2018 (and updated in July 2019 and November 2020), the OfS has published the outcomes of statistical modelling which aimed to account for sector-wide factors including entrance qualifications and student characteristics which may influence attainment. Remaining factors were described as ‘unexplained’. The latest analysis suggested that the University saw an ‘unexplained’ increase in attainment of 1 and 2:1 degrees from -1.9% in 2010/11 to 9% in 2018/19. The analysis presented below attempts to identify some of the factors influencing the University degree classification profile and changes over time, the work we are doing to explore this further and some of our policy and practice we consider to have had an impact on our degree outcomes.

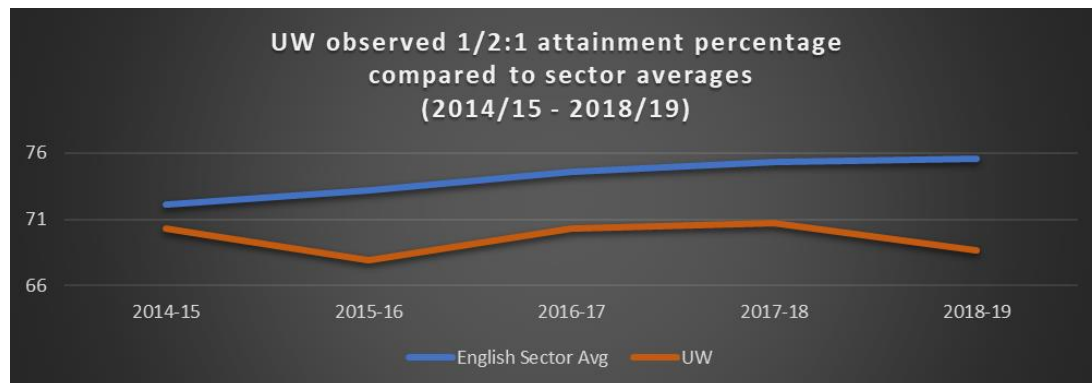
It should be noted, as is evident from the graph below, that the proportion of 1 and 2:1 awards made by the University is consistently below the sector average. This is influenced by the average entry qualifications of our students, their social characteristics and our subject mix. We consistently recruit students equally from across the POLAR quintile range as demonstrated by HE Policy Institute research.<sup>2</sup> The work we have undertaken to date in analysing the distribution of outcomes across different student groups (data mentioned in the following pertains to 2018/19 internal data), indicates that:

- Students who enter with BTEC qualifications (approximately 22% of entrants in 2018) do less well in terms of degree outcome than students who enter with A level qualifications

<sup>1</sup> Source: Guardian League Table 2011 & 2017 (ie. prior to tariff changes) respectively

<sup>2</sup> HEPI research repeatedly places the University in the top ten institutions showing most equality of intake across POLAR groups eg. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/HEPI-Policy-Note-6-Benchmarking-widening-participation-FINAL.pdf> (2018)

- Students from under-represented groups, including those from lower participation neighbourhoods (approximately 32% of entrants from POLAR4 quintiles 1 & 2) and BME students (approximately 12% of entrants) and mature students (approximately 30% of degree entrants) do less well in terms of degree outcomes. Our targets for narrowing these gaps and associated action can be found in our [Access and Participation Plan 2020-2025](#)
- The degree profile for students in different subject areas varies across the University and we are doing work to understand how this variation compares with the sector as a whole
- We have reduced the gap in degree classification outcomes between disabled students and those with no declared disability from 6% in 2013/14 to less than 1% in 2017/18.



## 2 Assessment and marking practices

All undergraduate programmes within the University are subject to a single set of [University regulations](#) to ensure consistent decision-making and equity in outcomes for students. In addition the University has a well-established [Assessment Policy](#). This provides a comprehensive statement of the requirements that govern the design and management of student assessment and marking processes to ensure these meet sector expectations. The University Regulations and the Assessment Policy apply equally to awards delivered through partnership arrangements.

The University utilises a literal grade, rather than a percentage-based, system of marking. This has the advantage of enabling and encouraging marks to be awarded across the full grade scale without the false precision of very granular numerical marking, or the cliff edge of ‘borderlines’.

The University’s quality processes for course approval and review, utilise external expertise in line with the UK Quality Code to assure academic standards. All course approvals and reviews therefore include external academic advisers with subject expertise to confirm appropriate engagement with – and alignment to – relevant sector reference points including the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, and PSRB requirements.

All courses are required to publish, for students, assessment and grade criteria that are referenced to the University generic grade criteria. We are currently in the process of reviewing these in the light of the publication of the Outcome classification descriptions for Level 6.<sup>3</sup>

External examiner arrangements are managed according to the principles and procedures set out in the University’s [Regulations for the Appointment of External Examiners](#). All external examiner

<sup>3</sup> QAA Outcomes classification descriptions for Level 6 [https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/annex-d-outcome-classification-descriptions-for-fheq-level-6-and-fqheis-level-10-degrees.pdf?sfvrsn=824c981\\_10](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/annex-d-outcome-classification-descriptions-for-fheq-level-6-and-fqheis-level-10-degrees.pdf?sfvrsn=824c981_10)

reports received in 2019 confirmed that standards set were appropriate and that student outcomes were comparable to other degree awarding bodies. Additionally, all external examiners confirmed the rigour and fairness of the management of the process of determining grades and student outcomes.

### **3 Academic governance**

[Academic Board](#) is the central University Committee with oversight of all matters relating to academic regulations, standards and quality. Authority is delegated to key sub-committees, most pertinently the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee (ASQEC) and the Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Committee (LTSEC). These Committees receive regular reports on key metrics and stakeholder feedback.

An overall report on quality and standards is presented to Academic Board members, and to the Board of Governors, annually, in the autumn. This report draws together data on student outcomes (including analysis by School of degree classification outcomes and changes year on year), student feedback, outlines the work undertaken through internal and external review of the quality and standards of taught degree and research degree programmes, and provides a summary of the main themes from external examiner reports.

The University has a well embedded annual evaluation process that operates at course, School and University levels with a view to ensuring the maintenance of academic standards and identifying opportunities for quality enhancement.

Course annual evaluation reports are considered through School-level scrutiny processes to ensure they are appropriately rigorous and set clear actions to address any identified issues. Course reports feed into School evaluation and development plans. These are reviewed by College Learning, Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committees. This process concludes with ASQEC, at its January meeting, considering reports from the Head of Academic Quality and from Colleges on the effectiveness and outcomes of the process. This process applies equally to courses delivered through partnership arrangements.

LTSEC and ASQEC hold a joint meeting at the end of October to consider and agree the overall report on quality and standards and a draft action plan which identifies planned projects and associated work streams which will result in quality enhancements.

As indicated above awards made under collaborative partnership arrangements are subject to the same policies and processes for assessment, marking and feedback. Similarly, the same processes for course approval, review and monitoring/evaluation are carried out by University staff and are reported through the same structures as for University taught provision.

### **4 Classification algorithms**

All students must achieve 360 credits in order to successfully achieve an Honours award. Students have an automatic right to reassessment for any failed module and can repeat the module and take a further reassessment if necessary, but all such grades are capped. Similarly, grades are capped for late submissions, an outcome that can only be reversed where there is an accepted case for mitigating circumstances.

Like many universities, we do not include the first year module marks into a student's final degree classification. In addition, for every student, we use two different methods to work out overall

marks, and calculate which of these two methods would give the student the best possible degree classification. The two methods are explained to students under [Awards information](#). Both methods count the number of grades achieved at module level. Briefly, the first method takes into account credits achieved at both Levels 5 and 6 (counting the best 120 credits taken from 60 credits at Level 5 and 120 credits taken at Level 6). The second takes into account the best 90 credits at Level 6 only.

Both methods remove the lower graded modules from the calculation used to classify an award. This means that if students underperform in their second year, their best third year modules can be used. If students underperform in their third year, their best second year modules can be used as described above. Again, this is a fair and genuinely inclusive means of calculating a degree classification and demonstrates that, even before the pandemic, we have sought to ensure that our students can obtain the result that best reflects their overall performance, even where they may unexpectedly underperform at either Level 5 or Level 6. Many other universities do not routinely adopt this approach.

We have begun a review of our approach to classification. Our regulations do not permit compensation or condonement of modules, and there is no provision for 'borderlines' or discretionary 'lifting' of grades by examination boards. This strict mathematical approach to classification algorithms has been in place since the introduction of the modular scheme for 2002/03 entrants with only minor adjustments to reflect sector practice (eg the removal of a requirement for the dissertation or independent study module in the final year). This means our approach to classification is consistent over time. Our review is taking account of the new outcome classification descriptors for Level 6 and the UKSCQA publication '[Principles for Effective Degree Algorithm Design](#)' (July 2020). Discussions include whether to adopt a single algorithmic approach for all but 'direct entry' students, appropriate weighting of Level 5 credit and the extent to which discounting might be permitted in the future.

Alongside our review, we identify classification profiles at course level to identify any that appear to be significantly out of line with the University average and/or sector averages. This is work in progress and stands alongside the work we have undertaken over the last five or more years to improve assessment and the consistency of marking practices.

## **5 Teaching practices and learning resources**

The University is committed to creating and sustaining the conditions that enable all students to benefit from an educational experience which is intellectually, socially and personally transformative (see our current [Strategic Plan](#)). We are committed to ensuring that our management of academic quality is enhancement-focused and over the last period has included improvements related to teaching resources, student support and curriculum and assessment design. Some of the enhancements that are likely to have had a positive effect on degree outcomes include:

- strengthening of the personal academic tutor system as articulated in our [Personal Academic Tutor Policy](#) to focus on supporting student engagement and academic progression
- increased emphasis on both initial and continuing professional development of staff to achieve professional recognition (FHEA) and accredited HE teaching qualifications
- focus in course design on clear course aims and learning outcomes with explicitly aligned learning, teaching and assessment strategies

- improving the quality and consistency of feedback to students through strategies for early formative assessment, course specific feedback policies, systematising standardisation of marking and ensuring use of the full range of grades as recommended by external examiners
- implementation of inclusive approaches to assessment that provide students with some choice in the mode of assessment.

These measures have been developed in partnership with students. As a result, over the past ten years, the University has improved student satisfaction with assessment and feedback as measured by the NSS from 66% in 2009 to 79% in 2020 (unchanged from 2019). We regard this as fundamental to improving assessment processes and to ensure that students are able to achieve their potential. These measures are documented and discussed within the annual Quality and Standards Report to the Board of Governors.

## **6 Identifying good practice and actions**

As indicated in previous sections of this statement, we have set some key actions as part of our annual institutional Quality Enhancement Plan.

In order to ensure that students can easily identify the requirements for successful completion of their award we provide them with detailed course level assessment and grade criteria. Generic criteria were agreed in 2020 and academic departments are now reviewing subject level criteria in order to assure alignment. Accordingly, all courses will provide updated information for students from 2021/22 and, in this way, requirements for final classifications will also be made clearer to students.

We continue to carry out detailed analysis of classification outcomes with a particular focus on the outcomes of different demographic groups in order to better understand differences and address attainment gaps. We also plan to undertake deeper analysis of the extent to which the University's subject mix may impact upon the relative overall proportions within each classification band.

Following successful pilots involving the provision of detailed data on course related classification profiles to external examiners, from Summer 2020 this practice has been adopted for all Honours degrees across the University.

## **7 Concluding Statement**

We continue to maintain oversight of the proportions of classifications awarded to our students both at subject and University level. In addition, and primarily through evolving work related to the University's Access & Participation Plan, we also continue to explore gaps between different student groups and determine where these might be positively influenced. Approaches are reinforced by our ongoing commitment to supporting an increasingly diverse range of students, largely through the strengthening of our personal academic tutor system which aids students' transition to HE and helps them reflect on their individual progress and get the most out of their university experience.

We remain assured that the awards achieved by our students are appropriate and fair, largely as a result of our commitment to focus on inclusive assessment design and on standardisation, moderation and marking practices. These assessment practices are reinforced through emphasis on continuing professional development of staff and University-wide encouragement to achieving professional FHEA recognition. External examiners consistently commend the University's approaches in this regard, commenting regularly and positively on innovation in assessment, the thorough processes for moderation and the quality of feedback provided to students.