

Degree Outcomes Statement

1 Institutional degree classification profile

The University of Worcester has seen 1.7 percentage point increase in the proportion of first class Honours degrees awarded over the last 5 years, and a 2.3 percentage point decrease in the proportion of 1 and 2:1 degrees over the same period. The proportions of both increased in the 2020/21 academic year, compared with 2019/20 academic year, which may be associated with the 'safety net' processes put in place to deal with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic (see below). Looking at internal data provided for the 2021/22 academic year, overall figures are closer to the levels seen in 2019/20.

The profile for each of the 5 years can be seen in the table below. Note that 21/22 totals are provided from internal data and will be updated once HESA figures are published.

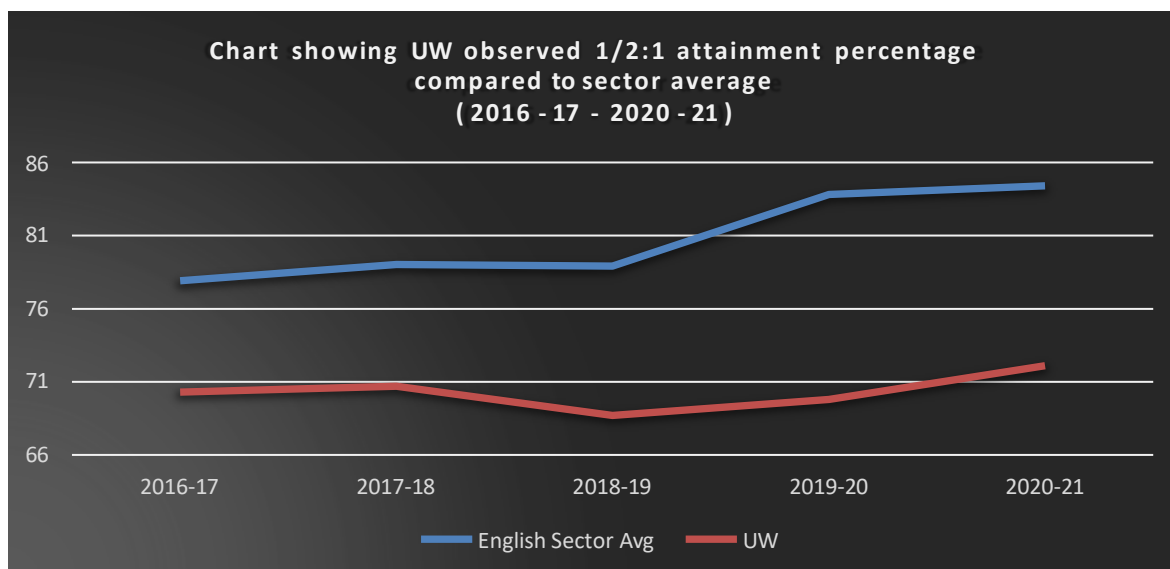
Academic Year	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22
Proportion of First Class degrees (%)	21.9	20.5	22.3	25	23.6
Proportion of First/Upper Second Class degrees (%)	70.7	68.7	69.8	72.1	68.4

[Data taken from workbooks associated with OfS publication 2022.22](#)

Annually since 2018, the OfS has published the outcomes of statistical modelling which aim to account for sector-wide factors including entrance qualifications and student characteristics which may influence attainment. Remaining factors are 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 8.7% in 2020/21, placing the University 112 out of 159 institutions, very much at the lower end of the scale in terms of unexplained increases. This is in comparison to an 'unexplained' figure of 14.7% at sector level for 2020/21. 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 policy and practice matters that 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 (72.1% in 2021/21) is consistently below the sector average (84.4% in 2020/21), 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.¹

¹ 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)



The increase in 1 and 2:1 degree classifications since 2010/11 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 and 114 in 2021 (post tariff changes)²).

As identified in our Access and Participation Plan, we are aware of attainment gaps and have targets to narrow these in relation to entry qualifications, ethnicity, socio-economic disadvantage and age. The work we have undertaken to date in analysing the distribution of outcomes across different student groups (data mentioned in the following pertains to 2021/22 internal data), indicates that:

- Students who enter with BTEC qualifications (approximately 20% of entrants in 2021/22) do less well in terms of degree outcome than students who enter with A level qualifications
- Students from under-represented groups, including those from lower participation neighbourhoods (approximately 33% of entrants from POLAR4 quintiles 1 & 2) and BME students (approximately 15% of entrants) and mature students (approximately 36% 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.

The statistical analysis above of the changes in proportions of first and upper second class awards made in the last five years, includes the recent pandemic years. We made some changes to the regulations in the two pandemic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 which are summarised below:

- 2020/21 saw all assessments moving fully online between May and September. The University did not adopt a 'no-detriment' policy, but instead provided a 'safety net' approach allowing students to defer assessments and to have an additional reassessment opportunity. External examiner reports confirmed academic standards were met and, in many cases, commended this approach

² Source: Guardian League Table 2011, 2017 (ie. prior to tariff changes) and 2022 (post tariff changes)

- 2021/22 saw a continuation of principles established in the previous year, with the ‘safety net’ approach allowing uncapped reassessment continuing alongside a pragmatic approach to mitigating circumstances and a continued emphasis on the approach already built into assessment practices and policy. External examiner reports continued to reflect positively on this approach.

These changes appear to have had some marginal impact on the achievement of 1 and 2:1 degrees, and in particular for first class awards. This may be associated in part to some changes to assessment practice, including unseen to seen examinations, additional time to complete assessments, and some relaxation on the standards of evidence for uncapped reassessments.

In 2021/22, there were no adjustments to regulations related to Covid, except through the normal provisions of the mitigating circumstances procedures. The statistical analysis shows that it is the proportion of first class Honours awarded that has shown increase over the last four years. We are also very aware that there is significant variation across our range of subjects in grade profile outcomes, such that some subjects have significantly higher proportions of first class grades awarded than do others. We are pleased that external examiners are beginning to engage with issues of ‘grade inflation’ in their reports. We plan to do more analysis of grade outcome profiles. Where there is evidence of inflation of first class awards at course level, we ask course teams to review their assessment and grade criteria to ensure first class marks are aligned with the FHEQ and University descriptors.

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. Following the publication of the Outcome classification descriptions for Level 6³, (and which are now incorporated into the OfS Sector recognised standards) we have published updated [Generic Grade Descriptors for the University](#).

³ 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

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 reports received in 2021 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 all students entering at Level 4 before September 2022, 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.

We have now completed a comprehensive review of our approach to the degree classification which has taken account of the outcome classification descriptors for Level 6 in the OfS sector recognised standards, and the UKSCQA publication '[Principles for Effective Degree Algorithm Design](#)' (July 2020).

For all new students entering at Level 4 from September 2022 who are due to graduate in 2024/25, two updated methods will be used to calculate degree classifications. The first uses the profile of 120 credits attained at Level 5 and 120 credits attained at Level 6. Grades are weighted on a ratio of 1:2. The second method uses the grade profile of 120 credits attained at Level 6 only.

This new approach removes the process of discounting of modules and places greater emphasis on exit velocity. 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. We expect this to have a stabilising influence on the proportion of first class degrees awarded.

Alongside our reviewed algorithm, we continue to 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
- developmental work on academic integrity to increase awareness and understanding on the part of students and staff.

These measures have been developed in partnership with students. 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. Following a review and updating of generic grade descriptors in 2020, all course reviewed their assessment criteria/grade descriptors and rubrics in 2020/21 to ensure they were aligned with the generic descriptors. These were published for students at course/module level in 2021/22.

We continue to carry out 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. Our Access and Participation Plan commits us to addressing gaps identified.

External examiners are provided with detailed data on course related classification profiles for all Honours degrees across the University. We are exploring how we can provide external examiners with time-series classification data at course/subject level and specifically ask for commentary on this, as a means of guarding against inflation. We will also be reviewing practice against the recently published QAA principles for external examining in 2022/23.

7 Concluding Statement

We continue to maintain strong oversight of the proportions of classifications awarded to our students both at subject and University level. We do not have high levels of 'unexplained' increase in proportions of first and upper second class honours. The adjustments we made to our assessment to deal with the challenges of the pandemic, were based on pragmatic changes to the nature of the assessments and providing more time together with a 'safety net' in the event of failure rather than 'no detriment'. This may have been associated with a small rise in the proportion of first class honours awarded.

Over the last three years we have mapped our assessment and grading criteria to the sector recognised standards and asked all subjects areas to review their criteria to align with these. We are providing more information to our external examiners so that they can comment on grade profiles and we continue to provide support for our staff in relation to the design and management of assessment and standards. We have also completed a review of our approach to classification and agreed a modified approach which will come into effect for our 2024/25 graduates. The modifications have been guided by sector-supported principles on degree algorithms.

We remain confident 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 and feedback practices. 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.

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