

# DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

TRANSPARENT,  
CONSISTENT AND  
FAIR ACADEMIC  
STANDARDS

CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

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## About this consultation

This consultation is being run by the [Quality Assurance Agency](#) (QAA) on behalf of the [UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment](#) (UKSCQA) and all its members, including the four UK higher education funding bodies/regulators: DfE-NI, HEFCW, the OfS and SFC.

UKSCQA provides sector-led oversight of higher education quality assessment arrangements that continue to be shared across the UK. The committee has members drawn from regulated providers in England and Wales, publicly-funded universities and colleges in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and providers currently designated for student support by the Secretary of State in England. Student interests are represented by both the National Union of Students and individual student members. Membership is also drawn from the four UK higher education funding/regulatory bodies, sector bodies and regulatory partners.

In the context of the regulatory arrangements in England, UKSCQA membership includes persons representing a broad range of registered higher education providers.

This consultation should be read in conjunction with [Degree classification: transparent, consistent and fair academic standards](#). UKSCQA invites feedback on how the recommendations and proposals made in the report can be developed and implemented by universities and colleges and the collective sector to protect the value of qualifications over time - which is expressed as an Expectation within the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education \(the Quality Code\)](#).

## Who should respond

UKSCQA is particularly interested to hear from students, governing bodies and senior leaders representing the broad diversity of UK higher education, graduate employers and other stakeholders, including professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) across the UK.

In England, responses to questions 11, 12 and 13 are specifically invited from higher education providers registered with the Office for Students.

UKSCQA invites feedback on the relevance of the report's recommendations across the UK, and on how the statement may be taken forward by devolved national sectors.

## How to respond

Responses should be made through the [online portal](#) hosted by the QAA by **17.00 on Friday 8 February 2019**.

For further information, please contact Simon Bullock at QAA: [s.bullock@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:s.bullock@qaa.ac.uk)

## Background to the consultation

UKSCQA co-ordinates a UK-wide co-regulatory approach to quality and standards by bringing together the UK funding bodies and regulators for higher education with sector and student representative bodies.

This consultation sets out proposals for taking forward the recommendations presented in the report - 'Transparent, consistent and fair academic standards: degree classifications' (the report). Published alongside this consultation, the report presents research and analysis conducted by Universities UK (UUK), GuildHE and QAA on behalf of UKSCQA that considers the drivers of the uplift in degree classification over the past decade.

A supporting UKSCQA-commissioned technical report, [The drivers of degree classifications \(PDF, 1MB\)](#), by Dr Ray Bachan at the University of Brighton, is also published on the UUK website.

## Summary of findings from the report

The report highlights how between 2007-08 and 2016-17, the combined number of first-class and upper second-class (1st and 2.1, or 'upper') honours awarded in the UK grew by 55 per cent. The proportion of 1sts has doubled from 13 per cent to 26 per cent of all classified degrees. Now 75 per cent of undergraduate students are expected to graduate with upper degrees. The trends present two main challenges to the sector:

- the need to maintain and strengthen the public's confidence in the integrity of academic standards in the context of improving student attainment, and
- the need to respond to ongoing improvements in student attainment within the current approach to classifying and calibrating student attainment to enable differentiation.

The report sets out the case that these complex challenges require a clear and demonstrable response, individually by institutions and collectively by the UK and national sectors. In doing so, it identifies areas with the potential to strengthen and enhance existing quality assurance arrangements, and presents a series of recommendations on which UKSCQA is now consulting.

## Principles for the sector's response

Feedback gathered during the research which fed into the report, identified the following principles as central to the sector's response:

- The diversity and autonomy of the sector is a strength. Proposals must be founded on the practice of autonomous, self-critical providers, should be adaptable to the broad range of institutions in the sector, and be applicable to the different contexts of the UK's constituent nations.
- Existing quality assurance arrangements already provide a framework for monitoring and maintaining academic standards. Proposals must enhance and strengthen these arrangements and not replicate them.
- Current and future students should not be unfairly disadvantaged. Proposals must protect the interests of students, be developed with their input, should be communicated clearly, and taken forward with reasonable consistency.
- Criterion-referenced assessment and classification offers a good measure of student attainment. Proposals should enable institutions and students to

demonstrate fair improvement in attainment, and not place quotas on success through norm-referenced grading.

### **Proposal: a UK-wide statement of intent**

With this feedback in mind, UKSCQA proposes that a clear statement should be made by the sector to protect the value of honours degree qualifications over time. The statement should encourage and support a process of review by institutions to ensure the transparency, reasonable consistency and comparability of academic standards. The statement should aim to:

- a. maintain public confidence in academic standards and improving student attainment, and
- b. protect the value of qualifications over time, maintain the sustainability of the degree classification, and prevent potential grade inflation.

## Components of the statement

The report proposes that the statement should represent a high-level aspirational response from the sector, building on UK-wide statements. It should outline priority areas for consideration and review by institutions and national sectors, as appropriate, to protect the value of qualifications over time. This should include the review, as appropriate, of:

- 1 Institutional evidence on degree outcomes, including publication of institutional 'degree outcomes statements' or through external review depending on national quality arrangements, ensuring there is appropriate external assurance and advice at governance level to fully consider findings and implications (further explained in **'Taking forward the statement': Sections A, B and C**).
- 2 The design and rationale of degree algorithms to ensure they protect the conventions of national qualifications frameworks and institution's own learning criteria and outcomes, and the conventions of the honours degree structure. To support this, the report recommends a sector-wide dialogue to established shared principles for algorithm practice, with an emphasis on borderline 'zones of consideration' and discounting practices, outside mitigating circumstances (**'Taking forward the statement': Section D**).
- 3 Assessment criteria and marking scales to ensure that they protect the principles of higher learning as outlined by national qualifications frameworks and the sustainability of the honours degree classification system (**'Taking forward the statement': Section E**).
- 4 Quality assurance processes, including the use of sector benchmarking and the role of external examiners, to help align assessment criteria and practices (**'Taking forward the statement': Section E**).
- 5 The support and professional development for external examiners and academic staff (**'Taking forward the statement': Section E**).

The statement is proposed at a UK-level. To ensure practices are taken forward by providers and national sectors meaningfully, whilst maintaining wider stakeholder confidence, the report proposes that the statement should be supported by measures consistent with the nature of the challenges and national regulatory and quality arrangements. These measures are examined in the following sections.

1. Does the adoption of a UK sector-wide statement of intent represent an effective approach to meeting the challenges outlined in the report?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. In part

Please explain your response.

2. What other approaches could be explored to address the issues at a UK sector-wide level?

## What the statement would produce

UKSCQA proposes that the statement is taken forward through an active process of review by individual providers to ensure that they are protecting the value of their qualifications. It is important that this process represents a collective commitment by individual institutions to protect confidence in the value of qualifications.

The report recommends that this process should begin with a review of a provider's practices, and report on any changes it makes as a result of such a review within one year of publication of the statement of intent. It is acknowledged that the process for making material changes to the regulations that affect enrolled cohorts of students will have to take into account relevant consumer protection legislation.<sup>1</sup>

3. What do you consider a reasonable period for a provider to review its practices and enact appropriate changes?

The statement will include commitments to reviewing the processes through which a degree is assessed, classified, confirmed, and conferred, and the quality assurance of these processes. Higher education is provided by a range of institutions, including those not able to award their own degrees. All providers play a crucial role in educating our students and in protecting the value of qualifications over time, particularly in respect of academic judgement, course design and delivery, and ultimately the responsibility for securing standards rests with the degree-awarding body.

## Taking forward the statement

It is proposed that the statement should be founded on the principle that it is both the responsibility of, and in the interests of, higher education institutions to protect the value of their qualifications. The statement should also be founded on a need to ensure that there is confidence in the reasonable consistency and comparability of practice across higher education institutions using a common honours degree classification framework, proposed in this consultation. The following sections propose how the statement could be taken forward in a meaningful way by providers and national sectors.

## National approaches

The UK comprises four distinct higher education sectors. The report shows that the nature of the uplift in degree outcomes, while similar in some respects across the UK, is experienced differently in the four nations based on the regulatory and quality architecture and the ways in which higher education is funded and delivered.

UKSCQA proposes that the statement of intent and proposals for the long-term sustainability of the degree classification system should represent a UK-wide framework for action. At the same time, it is proposed that the practical steps suggested by the statement should also be taken forward by providers in line with their national quality and regulatory frameworks.

UKSCQA would be particularly interested to hear from respondents how the statement of intent could be taken forward collectively in the devolved sectors. This includes how the proposals outlined in the following sections may be adapted or integrated as necessary for national quality arrangements.

4. How can the statement of intent be taken forward by the different national higher education systems of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland within their national quality and regulatory frameworks?

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<sup>1</sup> The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published [UK higher education providers - advice on consumer protection law](#) in 2015, clarifying that all UK universities are subject to consumer rights regulations which impact on when and to which student cohorts changes in regulation and practice can occur.

## Section A: Institutional evidence

The UK benefits from a nationwide framework for quality assurance, expressed in the [Quality Code](#), with national variations reflecting the devolved nature of higher education. UKSCQA sees this consultation as an opportunity to build on the Code's UK-wide expectation that the value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time, is in line with sector-recognised standards.

The report articulates the collective challenge of maintaining confidence that the uplift in degree classification is not due to any lowering of standards and is the natural result of improving student attainment. It highlights the complexity of the phenomena, and systemic and practical risks that may undermine the perceived value of qualifications over time.

To meet this challenge, it is proposed that the statement should include a commitment for each provider to review and publish institutional evidence relating to degree outcomes. This would aid transparency and allow institutions to evaluate improvements in attainment, demonstrate the impact of enhancement-led activities and identify trends which may pose a risk to academic standards.

It is proposed that such a review should be initiated by an institution's leadership and supported by national quality arrangements. The results would be a 'degree outcomes statement' published by each provider. UKSCQA proposes that the areas set out in Table A would represent a useful framework for this review. It would be for an institution, working within relevant external assurance mechanisms, to undertake an honest and transparent assessment of its data to identify potential risks.

**Table A: Proposed areas for inclusion in a 'degree outcomes statement'**

Academic governance	Whether or not institutional governance protects the value of qualifications over time including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• academic governance, including academic boards</li><li>• external assurance at governance level and at programme level.</li></ul>
Institutional grade profile	The quantitative relationship between degree outcomes and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• entry qualifications</li><li>• student characteristics</li><li>• subject mix</li><li>• sector benchmarks (see Section E).</li></ul>
Classification algorithm	A clear description of the institution's degree classification algorithm and its rationale, including changes made (Section D).

Marking practices	<p>Activities undertaken to support consistency of marking, and consistency in appeals and treatment of special circumstances, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development of staff and appointment of external examiners (Section C)</li> <li>• use of qualitative sector reference points (Section E).</li> </ul>
Equalities assessments	The potential impact and changes of academic regulations, assessment practices and university decisions on different student groups.

It will be important to ensure that the data used in the review is broadly comparable and makes appropriate use of data that providers already collect and analyse. The report recommends working with HESA to develop appropriate comparable data sets as part of any review. To help in this, the [Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework \(TEF\)](#), where this is used by providers, may also provide a potential starting point for selecting comparable data sets.

5. Are the evidence areas proposed at Table A for inclusion within a 'degree outcomes statement' appropriate for supporting an institution to identify potential 'grade inflation' risks and provide assurance to maintain public confidence?
- Yes
  - No
  - In part

Please explain your response.

## Section B: External assurance

The report identifies the potential to strengthen the external assurance provided to institutional governance on academic standards, particularly in nations where there continues to be cyclical external review processes.

To do this UKSCQA proposes that institutions consider creating an 'external advisor on academic standards' role. This would be filled either by senior external people with expertise in learning and teaching, or by an equivalent external process.

This role would initially help compile the 'degree outcomes statement', strengthen assurance to a provider's leadership and identify any risks to the protection of the value of its qualifications over time. In the longer term, the sector could consider its permanent value in assuring standards.

6. Do you consider there to be merit in gaining assurance from an 'external advisor on academic standards'?
- Yes (please explain your response)
  - No (please set out any other mechanisms for enhancing external assurance)

## Section C: External examining

The report corroborates findings from previous research that external examiners play an important role in the process of assuring academic standards. The report also highlights the need to ensure that the external examining system provides an appropriate challenge to degree-awarding bodies as they seek to protect the value of qualifications over time. To support this function, the report recommends that degree-awarding bodies should strengthen the external examination process by committing to ensuring:

- training to ensure that staff are equipped to act as external examiners, referenced against common sector expectations, broadly commensurate with the number of external examiners used by the institution
- opportunities for external examiners and academic staff to participate in subject-specific calibration activities
- that steps to protect the independence of external examiners (including the process of appointment, dismissal and conflicts of interest) are reiterated.

The Quality Code's new advice and guidance theme on External Expertise provides refreshed guidance for the sector on external examining which may help providers meet these commitments.

7. What are the:
- a. opportunities and/or
  - b. challenges
- associated with including the commitments to strengthening the external examiner system in the statement of intent?

[Advance HE](#) is developing training packages and opportunities to support the practice of external examiners. This represents a potentially important resource. To ensure there is a shared framework for recognising professional development, UKSCQA proposes that components of the [UK Professional Standards Framework](#) (UKPSF) relating to external examining should be enhanced, drawing on the curricula developed through the Advance HE programme.

8. What are the:
- a. opportunities and/or
  - b. challenges
- associated with enhancing components of the UKPSF relating to external examiners?

## Section D: Degree algorithms

The report highlights the potential risks associated with an overly diverse range of degree algorithms - primarily undermining confidence in the consistency and comparability of academic standards in a sector which, for the most part, classifies degrees under the same schema.<sup>2</sup>

There are debates about what is considered legitimate academic practice and the reasonable parameters on which algorithms vary. A limited range of approaches on pedagogic grounds is legitimate - for example, equal or stepped weighting of different years. But it is also a legitimate public expectation that the range of algorithms in use will produce largely the same classification from a given array of raw marks.

In addition to recommending more work be done to understand drivers behind grade inflation, the 2017 Universities UK and GuildHE report [Understanding degree algorithms](#) recommended that:

- higher education providers should ensure that their degree algorithms are transparent and accessible for students, staff and external stakeholders
- the process and rationale for making changes to degree algorithms should be transparent and led by robust academic governance arrangements
- principles of good practice for the design, development and review of degree algorithms should be considered for inclusion in a revised Quality Code to guide institutional decision-making
- institutions should ensure that the rules governing the assessment of borderline cases do not have the inadvertent effect of effectively lowering the threshold for degree classifications across the student population.

'Understanding degree algorithms' also found no justification for the use of multiple algorithms by a provider. It also recommended that discounting of low performing modules should be restricted or ended, particularly where this relates to core modules and risks undermining the learning outcomes for a course.

To take forward these recommendations, UKSCQA proposes that the statement should include a commitment from providers to explain the design of their algorithms clearly and accessibly, with an emphasis on:

- inclusion of different levels and the weighting of marks, including whether an arithmetic mean is being supplemented by a modal share or modal marks
- whether a zone of consideration has been used, particularly if rounding has been implemented at module level
- whether discounting of modules has taken place, particularly compulsory or core modules
- where requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) have influenced the design of algorithms.

It is proposed that the statement should highlight and explain areas of practice which may deviate from conventional approaches, outside mitigating circumstances. This would enable regulators, the wider sector and students, to understand how algorithms affect degree classifications.

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<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding differences in marking practices, award algorithms, and degree structures, classified undergraduate degrees will typically be awarded at the final stage within the overarching convention: 1st (=>70), 2.1 (60-69), 2.2 (50-59), 3rd (40-49), pass (35-40)

To take these recommendations forward, UKSCQA would like to consult specifically on whether or not institutions should explain the reasons for:

a) Using a 'zone of consideration' that exceeds a 0.5 per cent range of the upper threshold where rounding up has been employed at module level or one per cent where rounding up has not been used, outside mitigating circumstances.

b) 'Discounting' low performing modules at levels that would otherwise be form part of a degree programme's learning outcomes, outside of mitigating circumstances.

9. What are the barriers to implementing the recommendations in 'Understanding degree algorithms', particularly the publication and explanation of degree algorithm practices?

10. Should the statement of intent contain a provider's explanations of:

- |  |        |
|--|--------|
| a. weighting of marks?                   | Yes/No |
| b. 'zones of consideration'?             | Yes/No |
| c. 'discounting' low performing modules? | Yes/No |
| d. PSRB influences on algorithm design?  | Yes/No |

Please explain your responses.

## Section E: Classification descriptions and calibration

### Classification descriptions

*The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies* currently sets out the threshold standards for bachelor's degrees with honours, related to *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS). However, these express only the minimum level of achievement necessary to be awarded a degree - although a small number also express the higher standards students may reach, these are not easily comparable to the five-tiered classification system.

The report highlights the importance of assessing students against clear and consistent criteria that protect the value of qualifications. To support this, UKSCQA proposes the use of a more detailed description of the honours degree classifications to act as a shared reference point for autonomous institutional practice, external examining, and, in line with differing national contexts, regulatory purposes.

A draft classification description has been developed following sector-wide consultation across all UK nations, and is presented for formal consultation at Annex A. UKSCQA proposes that this description be appended, as a supporting resource, to *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications*.

It is proposed that the classification description should act as a reference point to aid the development and consistency of academic and institutional practice and regulatory and quality assurance processes. It is not the intention to replace a provider's institutional and subject-level assessment criteria or marking schemes, but to provide a sector-wide classification description within which autonomous degree awarding bodies can set their own academic standards.

It is also proposed that, in England, the Office for Students should consider adopting the proposed classification description as part of the 'sector-recognised standards' set out in section 13(3) of the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) 2017.

11. Does the proposed classification description in Annex A provide an appropriate reference point for degree classification practice?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Please explain your response.

12. Do you have any proposals for substantive changes to the classification criteria? Please explain your response.

13. Do you agree that the proposed classification description should be incorporated into national quality assurance and regulatory frameworks, as is appropriate for different national contexts? In England, this would mean the use of the proposed classification description as 'sector-recognised standards' as defined in section 13(3) of HERA.

14. How should the proposed classification description be incorporated into:

- a. institutional practice
- b. other relevant documents or frameworks?

## Calibration

The report recommends that the role and use of data in institutional quality assurance and calibration practices is reviewed, and UKSCQA supports this recommendation. It is proposed that the review should consider development of a metric for individual providers to use and that can be shared across the sector to inform self-assessment of changes in classifications over time and the impact of quality assurance processes.

It is proposed that the metric should use existing data collected and published by the [Higher Education Statistics Agency \(HESA\)](#), with the potential for developing a shared sector benchmark methodology to help inform institutional practice. The metric would support institutions to make judgements about grade inflation risks. To ensure any benchmark controls for institutional variation impacting on grade profile, the benchmark could include the following variables:

- prior student attainment
- subject mix
- student characteristics.

The report suggests that sector reference points, including the FHEQ/FQHEIS and a new shared description of degree classification (Annex A), quantitative benchmarks, and degree algorithm practices could support the work of external examiners, in formulating their advice and assessing whether a provider protects collective norms and practices.

15. What are the:
- benefits
  - challenges, and/or
  - national considerations
- of using a shared sector metric to inform institutional self-assessment of degree classifications over time?
16. How should a sector metric for degree classifications over time be defined?
17. How can sector reference points be better used, with more consistency, by external examiners to support institutions to protect the value of qualifications over time?

## The long-term sustainability of the degree classification system across the UK

The report proposes that policy agendas focused on good teaching and feedback are likely to have increased the proportion of upper degrees by helping to enhance the academic experience for students. Prospective students are rightly interested in the outcomes of graduates who have previously studied at a university or college. However, it is essential that such public information does not introduce inadvertent incentives that drive up the proportion of upper degrees. The report highlights persistent concerns that the inclusion of upper degrees in league table ranking algorithms has been a powerful influence on behaviours.

The report indicates a need to examine the longer-term sustainability of degree classification conventions from the perspective of different stakeholders. This means working with employers and students to alter perceptions of the value of 2.2 and 3rd classifications to avoid the perception that only a 2.1 or better is a 'good' degree. These issues, and other changes to the classification structure and information for students or employers, would be considered by a Task and Finish group.

UKSCQA wishes to hear from respondents about the merits and potential scope of a group to take this work forward. Possible options for reform which could help steer the group are proposed below. It is also proposed that any task and finish group should also review how the [Higher Education Achievement Report \(HEAR\)](#) could be developed in support of these aims.

18. Should the sector explore the steps that could be taken to remove, or reduce the impact of, the inclusion of upper degrees (1st and 2.1 awards) in algorithms used to rank university performance?

- Yes
- No

Please explain your response.

19. What should be the parameters and remit for a UK-wide task and finish group on the long-term sustainability of the UK's degree classification systems?

20. Which of the following options for reforming or enhancing the degree classification system should be considered in more detail? (Please indicate Yes/No)

<b>Reform option</b>	<b>Yes/No</b>
Introduction of new upper award - for example, a starred first	
Introduction of a 'cohort ranking' - for example, providing additional information on graduate's position in the grade distribution	
Resetting the classification boundaries - for example, moving up by 10 marks so 80 = 1st and so on	
More regular review of Subject Benchmark Statements to keep pace with improvements in teaching and learning	
Universal HEAR format	
Other (please explain)	
No reform required	

21. *Do you have any other comments on the proposals that have not been specifically asked in this consultation?*

## Next steps

The QAA will analyse responses and report back to UKSCQA following the closure of the consultation period. UKSCQA will consider the analysis, with outcomes and next steps expected to be published in April 2019.

## List of consultation questions

1. Does the adoption of a UK sector-wide statement of intent represent an effective approach to meeting the challenges outlined in the report?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. In part

Please explain your response.

2. What other approaches could be explored to address the issues at a UK sector-wide level?
3. What do you consider a reasonable period for a provider to review its practices and enact appropriate changes?
4. How can the statement of intent be taken forward by the different national higher education systems of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland within their national quality and regulatory frameworks?
5. Are the evidence areas proposed at Table A for inclusion within a 'degree outcomes statement' appropriate for supporting an institution to identify potential 'grade inflation' risks and provide assurance to maintain public confidence?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. In part

Please explain your response.

6. Do you consider there to be merit in gaining assurance from an 'external advisor on academic standards'?
  - a. Yes (please explain your response)
  - b. No (please set out any other mechanisms for enhancing external assurance)
7. What are the:
  - a. opportunities and/or
  - b. challenges

associated with including the commitments to strengthening the external examiner system in the statement of intent?

8. What are the:
  - a. opportunities and/or
  - b. challenges

associated with enhancing components of the UKPSF relating to external examiners?

9. What are the barriers to implementing the recommendations in 'Understanding degree algorithms', particularly the publication and explanation of degree algorithm practices?
10. Should the statement of intent contain a provider's explanations of:
 

a. weighting of marks?	Yes/No
b. 'zones of consideration'?	Yes/No
c. 'discounting' low performing modules?	Yes/No
d. PSRB influences on algorithm design?	Yes/No

Please explain your responses.

11. Does the proposed classification description in Annex A provide an appropriate reference point for degree classification practice?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

Please explain your response.

12. Do you have any proposals for substantive changes to the classification criteria?  
Please explain your response.
13. Do you agree that the proposed classification description should be incorporated into national quality assurance and regulatory frameworks, as is appropriate for different national contexts? In England, this would mean the use of the proposed classification description as 'sector-recognised standards' as defined in section 13(3) of HERA.
14. How should the proposed classification description be incorporated into:
  - a. institutional practice
  - b. other relevant documents or frameworks?
15. What are the:
  - a. benefits
  - b. challenges, and/or
  - c. national considerations

of using a shared sector metric to inform institutional self-assessment of degree classifications over time?

16. How should a sector metric for degree classifications over time be defined?
17. How can sector reference points be better used, with more consistency, by external examiners to support institutions to protect the value of qualifications over time?
18. Should the sector explore the steps that could be taken to remove, or reduce the impact of, the inclusion of upper degrees (1st and 2.1 awards) in algorithms used to rank university performance?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

Please explain your response.

19. What should be the parameters and remit for a UK-wide task and finish group on the long-term sustainability of the UK's degree classification systems?
20. Which of the following options for reforming or enhancing the degree classification system should be considered in more detail? (Please indicate Yes/No)

<b>Reform option</b>	<b>Yes/No</b>
Introduction of new upper award - for example, a starred first	
Introduction of a 'cohort ranking' - for example, providing additional information on graduates' position in the grade distribution	
Resetting the classification boundaries - for example, moving up by 10 marks so 80 = 1st and so on	
More regular review of Subject Benchmark Statements to keep pace with improvements in teaching and learning	
Universal HEAR format	
Other (please explain)	
No reform required	

21. Do you have any other comments on the proposals that have not been specifically asked in this consultation?

# Annex A: UK Degree Classifications - draft description

## Introduction

This document sets out a common description of the four main classifications for bachelor's degrees with honours - 1st, 2.1, 2.2, 3rd. These statements build upon the descriptors within *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS), for bachelor's degrees with honours (Level 6 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; and Level 10 in Scotland).

The difference is that the Frameworks express the threshold expectations - in other words, a 3rd class degree, but with some 'typical' features at a higher standard - whereas in this description we go beyond the threshold and express for the first time what the three higher classifications look like, while also articulating why a student may have failed.

This guidance has been informed by multiple providers' own criteria and the outcomes from consultations with students; HE providers; Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs); and others. It signposts student achievement generically at a high level - it is neither detailed nor exhaustive. Providers are, as autonomous institutions, free to consider how these may assist in their standards assurance and course development processes.

## How should this description be used?

This description may be useful for staff development, programme design and approval. These descriptors are not intended to act as a marking or assessment scheme for providers, nor do they explain how students achieve those outcomes. Providers should define their own programme-specific learning outcomes which detail the complexity of understanding and skills that students must achieve to gain a degree and classification. Providers may choose to use the descriptors alongside Subject Benchmark Statements for aligning or informing criteria for measuring student performance.

The different types of learning outcomes may not necessarily be assessed equally - providers are free to design courses with assessment weighted towards particular outcomes as they see fit.

## An explanation of each classification

Students are assessed against their curricula of study that should allow them to achieve these characteristics. At the most fundamental level, each classification means that students have achieved the characteristics of Level 6 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and Level 10 in Scotland of the respective national frameworks for higher education qualifications. This will include:

- knowledge and understanding - a systematic, extensive and comparative understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including coherent and detailed knowledge of the subject and critical understanding of theories and concepts, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline
- cognitive skills - a conceptual understanding of a level that is necessary to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems and comment on research and scholarship in the discipline, with an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge
- practical skills - an ability to manage their own learning and to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline or as necessary for their discipline, including creative arts

- transferable skills - including the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences, the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility and decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts
- professional competences - including specific professional requirements and the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature

A student's classification is determined by their level of attainment within this basic framework and their own engagement with the curricula and learning opportunities on offer to enhance their ability to:

- apply the skills, methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects
- critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements and frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution or identify options.

Classification	High-level description
<b>First-class honours (1st)</b>	<p><b>The student achieved all their course learning outcomes and:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrated advanced knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills</li> <li>• demonstrated excellent initiative and personal responsibility</li> <li>• was able to reflect critically and independently on their work</li> <li>• demonstrated excellent problem-solving skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Upper second-class honours (2.1)</b>	<p><b>The student achieved all their course learning outcomes and:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrated thorough knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills</li> <li>• consistently demonstrated initiative and personal responsibility</li> <li>• demonstrated an ability to reflect critically on their work</li> <li>• demonstrated thorough problem-solving skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Lower second-class honours (2.2)</b>	<p><b>The student achieved all their course learning outcomes and:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrated strong knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills</li> <li>• demonstrated initiative and personal responsibility</li> <li>• demonstrated a well-developed ability to reflect on their work</li> <li>• demonstrated strong problem-solving skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Third-class honours (3rd)</b>	<p><b>The student achieved all their course learning outcomes and:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrated knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills</li> <li>• demonstrated initiative and exercised personal responsibility</li> <li>• demonstrated an ability to reflect on their work</li> <li>• demonstrated problem-solving skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Fail</b>	<p><b>Did not achieve the course learning outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• failed to demonstrate adequate knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills</li> <li>• did not demonstrate adequate initiative and personal responsibility</li> <li>• was unable to reflect on their work</li> <li>• unable to demonstrate problem-solving skills.</li> </ul>

A more detailed framework is set out below.

## **Ordinary degrees**

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, full-time honours degrees usually take place over three years; in Scotland, they take place over four years. Whichever model is followed, students can decide in their final year to study slightly fewer credits and achieve an Ordinary degree.

Students completing an Ordinary degree are awarded a pass/merit/distinction, or a fail - they are not classified in the same way as honours degrees. Ordinary degrees are structured in a number of ways with typical models including a general degree where the emphasis is on breadth rather than depth of study, or a designated degree where the main subject of study will be identified in the award title and/or student transcript.

Ordinary degrees are also sometimes awarded to students who take the full honours degree but do not succeed in all assessments.

## **Pass degrees**

In England and Wales, students who study the full honours degree but do not achieve all the required credits may be awarded a Pass degree. Pass degrees are also not classified.

## Detailed descriptors

### Knowledge and understanding

<b>Fail</b>	<b>3rd (pass or threshold)</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>1st</b>
The student's knowledge and understanding of the subject is inadequate, without the required breadth or depth, with deficiencies in key areas.	The student has demonstrated a depth of knowledge and understanding in key aspects of their field of study, sufficient to deal with terminology, facts and concepts.	The student has demonstrated a sound breadth and depth of subject knowledge and understanding, which are sometimes balanced towards the descriptive rather than the critical or analytical.	The student has demonstrated sophisticated breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding, showing a clear, critical insight.	The student has shown excellent knowledge and understanding, well beyond the threshold expectation of a graduate at this level and beyond what has been taught.
The student has demonstrated inadequate understanding of subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles, including their limitations and ambiguities.	The student has demonstrated an understanding of subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles.	The student has consistently demonstrated an understanding of subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles as well as more specialised areas.	The student has demonstrated a thorough understanding of subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles and a sound understanding of more specialised areas.	The student has demonstrated an excellent understanding of subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles, and in-depth knowledge, if not mastery of a range of specialised areas.
The student has not produced sufficient evidence of background investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study.	The student has conducted general background investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study using established techniques, with the ability to extract relevant points.	The student has conducted background investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study using established techniques accurately, and can critically appraise academic sources.	The student has conducted thorough background investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study using established techniques accurately, and possesses a well-developed ability to critically appraise a wide range of sources.	The student has conducted independent, extensive and appropriate investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study well beyond the usual range, together with critical evaluation, to advance work and/or direct arguments.

## Cognitive skills

Fail	3rd (pass or threshold)	2.2	2.1	1st
The student has displayed an over-reliance on set sources. They have not demonstrated an adequate ability to select and evaluate reading and research.	The student has demonstrated the ability to select, evaluate and comment on reading, research and primary sources.	The student has selected, evaluated and commented on reading, research and primary sources, sometimes beyond the set range.	The student has thoroughly selected, critically evaluated and commented on reading, research and primary sources, usually beyond the set range.	The student has demonstrated an excellent ability to select, consider, evaluate, comment on and synthesise a broad range of research, primary sources, views and information and integrate references.
The student's arguments and explanations are weak and/or poorly constructed, and they are not able to critically evaluate the arguments of others or consider alternative views.	The student has shown the ability to devise and sustain an argument, with some consideration of alternative views, and can explain often complex matters and ideas.	The student has argued logically, with supporting evidence, and has demonstrated the ability to consider and evaluate a range of views and information. They have clearly and consistently explained complex matters and ideas.	The student has demonstrated the ability to make coherent, substantiated arguments, as well as the ability to consider, critically evaluate and synthesise a range of views and information. They have demonstrated a thorough, perceptive and thoughtful interpretation of complex matters and ideas.	The student has made consistent, logical, coherently developed, and substantiated arguments, and demonstrated the ability to systematically consider, critically evaluate and synthesise a wide range of views and information. They have demonstrated sophisticated perception, critical insight and interpretation of complex matters and ideas.
The student has shown a limited ability to solve problems and/or make decisions.	The student has demonstrated an ability to solve problems, applying a range of methods to do so, and the ability to make decisions in complex and unpredictable circumstances.	The student has consistently solved complex problems, selecting and applying a range of appropriate methods, and can make decisions in complex and unpredictable circumstances.	The student has demonstrated thorough problem-solving skills, selecting and justifying their use of a wide-range of methods, and can make decisions in complex and unpredictable circumstances with a degree of autonomy.	The student has demonstrated a wide range of extremely well-developed problem-solving skills, as well as a strong aptitude for decision-making with a high degree of autonomy, in the most complex and unpredictable circumstances.
The student has shown little or no real creativity.	The student has produced creative work.	The student has consistently demonstrated creativity.	The student shows a high level of creativity and originality throughout their work.	The student possesses excellent creative flair and originality.

## Practical skills

Fail	3rd (pass or threshold)	2.2	2.1	1st
The student has not demonstrated sufficient evidence of skills development or application.	The student has demonstrated evidence of developing and applying specialist skills.	The student has consistently demonstrated the development and informed application of specialist skills.	The student has demonstrated capable and confident performance/demonstration of specialist skills.	The student has demonstrated an accomplished and innovative application of specialist skills.
The student has attempted practical tasks/processes but followed a limited, procedural or mechanistic formula, and they contain errors, with little or no independence.	The student has completed practical tasks and/or processes accurately and with a degree of confidence and independence.	The student has consistently completed practical tasks/processes mainly independently in an accurate, well-coordinated and proficient way.	The student has performed practical tasks and/or processes autonomously, with accuracy and coordination.	The student has autonomously completed practical tasks and/or processes with a high degree of accuracy, coordination and proficiency.
The student has demonstrated a lack of technical and/or artistic skills in most, or key, areas.	The student has demonstrated technical and/or artistic skills.	The student has consistently demonstrated well-developed technical and/or artistic skills.	The student has a thorough command of highly-developed relevant technical/artistic skills.	The student has a full range of excellent technical/artistic skills.
The student has not presented their research findings clearly or effectively, and their gathering, processing and interpretation of data is unsatisfactory.	The student has presented their research findings, in several formats, and has gathered, processed and interpreted data effectively.	The student has consistently presented their research findings effectively and appropriately in many formats, and has gathered, processed and interpreted data efficiently and effectively.	The student has presented thorough research findings perceptively and appropriately in a wide range of formats, and has gathered, processed and interpreted a wide range of complex data efficiently and effectively.	The student has presented research findings perceptively, convincingly and appropriately in a wide range of formats, and has gathered, processed and interpreted a wide range of complex data efficiently and effectively.

## Transferable skills (including communication and digital)

Fail	3rd (pass or threshold)	2.2	2.1	1st
The student is not able to sufficiently express ideas and convey clear meaning verbally, electronically and/or in writing, uses inaccurate terminology, with many errors in spelling, vocabulary and syntax.	The student can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions verbally, electronically and in writing, with clear expression and style. They have also demonstrated numeracy and digital literacy skills.	The student can consistently and confidently communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions verbally, electronically and in writing. They show a clear, coherent, expressive style, with a range of vocabulary. They have consistently demonstrated strong numeracy and digital literacy skills.	The student can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions with a high-degree of proficiency verbally, electronically and in writing. They have a clear, fluent and expressive style with appropriate vocabulary. They have a high standard of numeracy and digital literacy skills.	The student can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to an accomplished level verbally, electronically and in writing. They have shown an accurate, fluent, sophisticated style. They possess excellent numeracy and digital literacy skills.
The student has made infrequent contributions to group discussions and/or project work.	The student has made useful contributions to group discussions and/or project work.	The student consistently makes coherent and constructive contributions to group discussions and/or project work.	The student makes strong, valuable contributions to group discussions and/or project work, with an understanding of team and leadership roles.	The student makes clear, authoritative and valuable contributions to group discussions and/or project work, with excellent teamwork and leadership skills.
The student has demonstrated little or no ability to manage their learning and/or work without supervision.	The student has shown an ability to manage their learning and work with minimal or no supervision.	The student has consistently shown an ability to systematically manage their learning, and work without supervision.	The student has shown a strong ability to systematically manage their learning, and work without supervision.	The student has shown an excellent ability to manage their learning on their own initiative, and work without supervision.
The student has not demonstrated adequate initiative or personal responsibility.	The student has demonstrated initiative and personal responsibility.	The student has consistently demonstrated initiative and personal responsibility.	The student has consistently demonstrated well-developed initiative and personal responsibility.	The student has demonstrated excellent initiative and personal responsibility.
The student has shown little or no ability to reflect on their work.	The student has demonstrated the ability to reflect on their work.	The student has consistently demonstrated a well-developed ability to reflect on their work.	The student has demonstrated the ability to reflect critically on their work.	The student has demonstrated an excellent ability to reflect critically and independently on their work.

## Professional competences (to the extent that they are expressed by the programme learning outcomes)

Fail	3rd (pass or threshold)	2.2	2.1	1st
The student has not demonstrated achievement of professional competence when assessed against the requirements of a PSRB.	The student has demonstrated achievement of professional competence when assessed against the requirements of a PSRB.			
The student has failed to adhere to the appropriate rules and/or conventions set by regulators or the industry.	The student has adhered to the appropriate rules and/or conventions set by regulators or the industry.			

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