

After the pandemic: our commitment to degree classifications

Maintaining the value of a degree is a priority for universities. As we emerge from the pandemic, now is an opportunity to reaffirm and strengthen our commitments to fair, transparent and reliable degree classification.

During the pandemic, many universities had to put measures in place to make sure students were not unfairly disadvantaged by changes to their course. Some of these contributed to increases in the typical proportion of firsts and 2.1 degrees being awarded. These measures were appropriate and proportionate given the unique circumstances of the pandemic. However, universities need to maintain the long-term value of UK degrees.

In line with the national return to pre-pandemic grading in GCSEs and A-Levels by 2023, our members are committing to returning to their pre-pandemic levels of firsts and 2:1s awarded in their undergraduate degrees by 2023.

Our commitment in detail

Over the past decade, developments in teaching, learning and assessment and student support, combined with students' hard work and investment in staff development, are helping students to achieve good results. However, while we should recognise and celebrate improvements, universities must be vigilant against the risks of grade inflation. This means taking meaningful action to address increases in upper degrees (firsts and 2.1s) that cannot be explained by these improvements. Students, employers and the public need to feel confident that degree classification is a reliable measure of students' performances.

In recent years, universities have been proactive and taken collective action to strengthen internal processes that impact on degree classification. The result was a levelling off by 2018–19 in the percentage of students achieving upper degree awards. Before the pandemic, universities were setting out plans for reviews and changes that were expected to see further progress being made.

The pandemic presented unique circumstances. Universities had to pause many planned activities to focus on supporting their students during this period. This included introducing a range of proportionate and appropriate measures to make sure students were not unfairly disadvantaged, including no detriment and safety net policies. There are important lessons from the pandemic that will have supported genuine improvements in students' performances. We are committed to exploring where and how these might be developed in the future.

However, we cannot lose sight of the need to maintain the value of a degree and so must redouble our efforts to identify and address unexplained increases in firsts and 2.1s. As a sector, we commit to reviewing our classification levels against the pre-pandemic progress that had seen trends stabilising. Our members will work to return to these levels as soon as possible.

Along with our members, we commit to the following actions:

1. Our members in England will report to their governing bodies and then publish revised degree outcomes statements by the end of 2022 that include:
 - a review of progress against actions set out in degree outcome statements of 2020 and 2021
 - a commitment to restart any outstanding actions paused during the pandemic with revised timelines, where they are still relevant
 - an assessment of pandemic-related changes and the impact on degree classification, using pre-pandemic data (relating to 2018–19) as an appropriate benchmark and setting out how they will return to pre-pandemic levels by 2022–23
 - a commitment to further actions to address any areas where there is unexplained inflation
 - an explanation of how sector-supported principles on degree algorithms and external examiners are being followed

2. UUK and GuildHE will publish a list of the revised degree outcomes statements on the UUK website.
3. In January 2023, UUK and GuildHE will publish an annual review of wider progress on the UK Standing Committee for Quality and Assessment (UKSCQA) statement of intent on degree classification. This will include committing to further sector-led action where there are common challenges or progress is stalling.
4. UUK and GuildHE will work with the Committee for University Chairs (CUC) to support governing bodies governing bodies to strengthen their understanding and scrutiny of degree classification trends and related activities.

This statement relates to England only although actions set out above remain part of a UK wide framework.