

# PROTECTING THE VALUE OF UK DEGREES:

REVIEWING PROGRESS  
ONE YEAR ON FROM THE  
STATEMENT OF INTENT



Universities UK

Diversity and Diversity  
in Higher Education



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR'S COVENANT

In May 2019, the UK higher education sector<sup>1</sup> restated its strong commitment to protecting the value of UK degrees over time. This was based on the following principles:

- Protecting the value of qualifications is in the interest of students – past, present and future – who deserve qualifications that they can take pride in.
- All higher education institutions are responsible for protecting the value and the sustainability of the classification system.
- Qualifications should be based on clear criteria that recognise, demonstrate and celebrate academic stretch and success.
- Higher education institutions are responsible for awarding degrees that benefit from common arrangements to protect their value.
- The diversity of the UK higher education sector is a strength, which is founded on shared, consistent and comparable academic practices.

This statement from the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) was published in *Degree classification: transparency, reliability and fairness – a statement of intent* (UKSCQA, 2019). While the issues and actions this highlighted varied across the UK nations, it presented a UK-wide commitment from the higher education sector to uniting the principles of transparency, reliability and fairness to protect the value of qualifications over time. This commitment built on the revised *UK Quality Code* (QAA, 2018a), launched in December 2018. The statement was signed by sector representative groups and endorsed by UKSCQA, which brings together students, higher education providers, representative bodies, and funders and regulators from across the UK. It is founded on the principle that protecting the value of qualifications is in the interest of students and is the responsibility of every institution.

### KEY MILESTONES

<b>October 2017</b>	Published <a href="#">Understanding degree algorithms</a> (UUK & GuildHE, 2017).
<b>November 2018</b>	Published <a href="#">Degree classification: transparent, consistent and fair academic standards</a> (UKSCQA, 2018b).
<b>November 2018 – February 2019</b>	Consulted on sector-wide actions to <a href="#">protect degree standards</a> .
<b>May 2019</b>	Published <a href="#">Degree classification: transparency, reliability and fairness – a statement of intent</a> (UKSCQA, 2019).
<b>October 2019</b>	Published sector-recognised degree classifications descriptors as an annexe to <a href="#">UK Quality Code</a> (QAA, 2018a).  Published guidance on the production and publication of degree outcomes statements for providers (England and Wales).
<b>January 2020</b>	Proportion of upper awards stalled at 76% for the 2018–19 academic year.
<b>January 2020– March 2020</b>	Sector consultation on algorithm design.
<b>July 2020</b>	Sector committed to a new set of <a href="#">principles for effective degree algorithm design</a> .  Published report on <a href="#">degree algorithm practice for 2020</a> .
<b>December 2020</b>	Published 61 degree outcomes statements (England and Wales). <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The UK higher education sector is made up of the systems in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland and their associated quality assurance approaches.

<sup>2</sup> This number is correct as of December 2020.

The sector had been experiencing a steady rise in the proportion of upper (first and 2:1) awards, from a UK-wide average of 61% in 2006–07 to 76% in 2018–19 and a trend that dates back further. Innovation and enhancement across teaching and learning, students' continued hard work and employers' expectations are important factors driving this trend. However, the challenge it posed to the sector was clear: the increase in upper degrees risked eroding the practical usefulness of the classification system for differentiating student and graduate attainment. More problematically, there is a continued risk that public confidence in the value of a degree from UK universities is being undermined by this trend and that instances of genuine student improvement may not be recognised fairly.

The statement of intent set out a roadmap to support the sector in this work and hold it to account, with four key commitments:

- ensure assessments continue to stretch and challenge students
- review and explain how final degree classifications are calculated
- support and strengthen the external examiners system
- review and publish data and analysis on students' degree outcomes

Each of the UK's nations detailed how their existing quality assurance processes – which vary by nation – and/or new activities would enable individual providers to meet these commitments. This report outlines progress to date across the sector relevant to the statement of intent. This has already seen a levelling off in the proportion of upper degrees being awarded with no increase witnessed in 2018–19. However, the report also sets out areas that could be explored to reinforce this work and ensure transparency, fairness and reliability in degree classification. It shows that the sector remains strongly committed to the statement's principles.



This review shows the sector has taken substantive action through statements of intent to protect the value of degree classifications. Individual institutions, their executive teams and governing bodies have engaged strongly, taking forward the sector's own guidance on maintaining degree standards and implementing best practice. Combined, these activities demonstrate a sector commitment to protect the value of qualifications so that students can have pride in their awards and have confidence that they are a true reflection of achievement. The review also demonstrates a robust commitment to further sector work in this area. It is an encouraging snapshot of progress, and we will continue to embed and set strong expectations for concerted progress.

**Professor Andrew Wathey, Chair, UKSCQA; Vice-Chancellor, Northumbria University**

## A SECTOR PROTECTING DEGREE STANDARDS

This review of progress demonstrates the wide range of work being taken forward across the sector within the different UK nations, as relevant to their distinct regulatory and quality assurance architecture. This activity has occurred at both a sector level, including work by and under the aegis of UKSCQA and led by Universities UK (UUK), GuildHE and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), as well as provider-level actions. It includes:

- Developing national descriptors for grade classifications expressing for the first time what all four classifications look like. This has been done through the publication of UK-wide degree classification descriptors by UKSCQA, now appended into the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). Since October 2020, **76% of providers across the UK have used or are intending to use the descriptors within their institution.**
- Supporting institutions' academic governance procedures to examine degree outcomes data and trends. England was required to develop degree outcomes statements and all Welsh higher education providers opted to produce these, supported by guidance. By December 2020, **61 providers in England and Wales had published degree outcomes statements**, setting out how student outcomes data has been scrutinised and the associated regulations and processes reviewed.
- Strengthening the processes by which degree outcomes are calculated by developing for the first time UK-wide principles for effective degree algorithm design. The propensity to use the guidance is high, with **96% of providers in a UK survey outlining their intention to use them within future algorithm reviews.** This is in addition to considerable changes to practice already evident since the publication of *Understanding degree algorithms* (UUK & GuildHE, 2017), with algorithms in 2020 more often following rule-based approaches, adopting clearer boundary policies, and being less likely to discount students' marks than in 2017.
- Enhancing the comparability of qualifications by developing the external examiner system's training and calibration activities. Since the statement of intent was published, **87% of providers have or intend to make changes to their external examiner process**, most often to develop additional guidance and ask examiners to reflect on degree classification trends. Since its inception in 2016, **Advance HE's degree standards programme has trained 2,664 participants in external examining in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.** An independent review of the programme found that its training has enhanced staff knowledge in respect of being a guardian of national standards and has led to changes in their practice.
- Deepening sector-wide engagement with maintaining academic standards through workshops and membership events organised by QAA.

## FUTURE AREAS TO PURSUE

The UK higher education sector is committed to strengthening further the covenant made within the statement of intent, including pursuing work to:

- Build an understanding of how changes to teaching, learning and assessment brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic relate to degree classification in the immediate and medium term. This should include consideration of the lessons learned over the period and reflection on the wider pedagogical implications of increasingly diverse forms and modes of provision.
- Encourage providers in England and Wales to revisit their degree outcomes statements a year after publication to include data from 2019–20 so as to reflect on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on degree classification while also evaluating progress against planned activities. Providers that have not yet published their initial degree outcomes statement will be expected to do so by the end of January 2021.
- Engage with QAA, the Office for Students (OfS), and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to consider the lessons learned from the first round of degree outcomes statements in England and Wales and to understand the opportunities for strengthening the co-regulatory approach to maintaining degree standards. This should involve updating guidance on degree outcomes statements to provide further clarity and include good practice examples. We also recommend more attention is paid by providers to OfS analysis of unexplained classification improvement and HEFCW analysis of classification trends.
- Explore opportunities for enhancing providers' internal quality assurance processes (for example, annual monitoring, periodic review and programme accreditation) and work to improve the transparency and understanding of these externally.
- Enable governing bodies to take a more robust approach as part of their role in overseeing and interrogating degree outcomes.
- Build on the external examiners work of Advance HE, considering further ways of strengthening externality. This might include working with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and learned societies to develop more subject-based calibration activities to support sector comparability, as well as sector-wide activity to establish clear standards of practice.
- Engage with governments to work with league table compilers to assess the use and presentation of a 'good degrees' metric, considering this within wider discussions of how to ensure students can access information to decide what and where to study.
- Raise the profile of both the statement of intent and the sector's commitments and activities at a provider-level to protect the value of qualifications with employers and public audiences, so that students' attainment is appropriately recognised.
- Develop further guidance on maintaining quality and standards in collaborative teaching partnerships whether delivered through validated, franchised or transnational provision. This guidance should outline the necessary considerations for maintaining quality and standards in the complex arrangements resulting from multiple partners or partnerships with degree-awarding bodies.

UUK and GuildHE will undertake a UK-wide stocktake of activity in a year's time to monitor the extent and impact of this work, with the potential for more in-depth reviews of specific strands of work at appropriate later stages. Where appropriate across all four UK nations, UKSCQA will continue to provide an important forum to ensure a UK-wide approach to maintaining academic standards and quality.

# 1: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

In May 2019, the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) published *Degree classification: transparency, reliability and fairness – a statement of intent* (UKSCQA, 2019), a UK-wide commitment from the higher education sector to protect the value of qualifications over time, building on the revised *UK Quality Code* (QAA, 2018a). It was founded on the following principles:

- Protecting the value of qualifications is in the interest of students – past, present and future – who deserve qualifications that they can take pride in.
- All higher education institutions are responsible for protecting the value and the sustainability of the classification system.
- Qualifications should be based on clear criteria that recognise, demonstrate and celebrate academic stretch and success.
- Higher education institutions are responsible for awarding degrees that benefit from common arrangements to protect their value.
- The diversity of the UK higher education sector is a strength which is founded on shared, consistent and comparable academic practices.

The publication of these principles was in response to the risk that a continued increase in the number of upper awards<sup>3</sup> – a UK-wide average increase from 61% to 76% between 2006–07 and 2018–19 (HESA, 2020), although the trend dates back further – risked undermining confidence in the value of degrees from UK universities and their usefulness in differentiating attainment.<sup>4</sup>

This report presents a review of progress, conducted by UUK and GuildHE on behalf of members and UKSCQA, to understand what the impact of the statement has been so far, what activity is under way and what the next steps are. Through this progress review, the UK higher education sector is reaffirming the commitments made in the statement of intent.

## STATEMENT OF INTENT ON DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

The statement of intent is composed of four key commitments. UK higher education institutions will continue to protect the value of degrees by:

- a. ensuring assessment and classification criteria stretch and challenge all their students, including meeting and exceeding shared sector qualifications criteria
- b. reviewing and explaining how their process for calculating final classifications:
  - fully reflects student attainment against learning criteria
  - protects the integrity of classification boundary conventions
  - maintains comparability of qualifications in the sector and over time
- c. enabling staff to protect the value of qualifications by:
  - supporting opportunities for academics to work as external examiners, including professional development and subject calibration activities
  - supporting new and existing academics and external examiners to apply institutional assessment criteria and regulations
  - reviewing and reiterating policies on internal and external moderation to ensure they enable challenge
- d. reviewing and publishing student outcomes data as part of the ongoing calibration of assessment and classification practices

<sup>3</sup> Principally, the proportion of first and 2:1 awards at Level 6 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and Level 10 in Scotland.

<sup>4</sup> The issue has been particularly high profile in England, where tackling public concerns about grade inflation was a manifesto pledge of the Conservative government elected in 2019.

To achieve the statement's aims and objectives, which continue to have relevance today, sector-led action as well as provider activities are required. The specific steps will vary according to each nation's distinct quality arrangements and regulatory architecture, while each provider will have its own risk profile and associated priorities. However, across all of the UK, the statement established a clear commitment to transparent, fair and reliable degree classification. This built on the findings and recommendations of the UKSCQA (2018a) research report, *Degree classification: transparent, consistent and fair academic standards*, and the outcomes of the associated consultation presented in *Transparency, reliability and fairness in degree classification: consultation report* (UKSCQA, 2018b).

Results for 2018–19 saw the rising proportion of upper awards in the UK stall, levelling off at 76%, the same as the year before (HESA, 2020). The sector recognises the need to continue work and reflection in this area. The statement of intent alone will not uphold academic standards; rather, it is the actions it leads to that will ensure the value of qualifications is protected at both the point of award and over time.

It is important to note, however, that this review has taken place during an unprecedented crisis for higher education, in the UK and internationally, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. For many providers and sector bodies in the UK, responding to the challenges created by the pandemic has necessarily taken priority, and staff and resources have been diverted from many planned activities. Moreover, emergency regulations and rapid changes to teaching and assessment to enable online arrangements are also expected to have had an impact on degree classification. Therefore, while the report shows considerable progress, we must remain attuned to circumstances beyond providers' control that continue to affect the sector's ability to pursue all aspects of the statement of intent.

The substance of this report maps out provider and sector activity against the four main statement commitments,<sup>5</sup> capturing the progress that the sector has made through their existing national quality arrangements and/or new activities. In Scotland, the statement of intent is secured by Scotland's distinctive Quality Enhancement Framework and in Northern Ireland through the Annual Performance Review process. In England, activity has included the introduction of degree outcomes statements. In Wales, institutions have opted to produce degree outcomes statements, and this has been integrated into the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales. The report also considers what the sector can do next to ensure continued progress on this issue, both within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (and the ongoing repercussions beyond the immediate lockdown periods) and into the future. This includes identifying examples of effective practice and locating further areas where guidance and support might be needed, either UK-wide or within a nation's specific context.

5 For the methodology of this report, see Annexe A.

## 2: REVIEWING STUDENT OUTCOMES DATA

### UK higher education institutions will continue to protect the value of degrees by:

- reviewing and publishing student outcomes data as part of the ongoing calibration of assessment and classification practices

UKSCQA identified the need for institutions to enhance the transparency and external assurance of their evidence in relation to grade outcomes. Numerous factors affect the awarding of a degree, meaning that the ways in which institutional policies, student characteristics and staff action fit together is complex. Therefore, the statement of intent included commitments to better understand the patterns and particulars of each provider in the four nations. In England and Wales, this has been taken up through degree outcomes statements, which outline the measures in place for interrogating institutional data and activity in relation to degree outcomes. As a new initiative, this report pays particular attention to the lessons and good practice the degree outcomes statements have generated.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, work has continued through existing quality assurance methods which already provided a framework for similar activity. In Scotland, the Quality Arrangements in Scottish Higher Education (QASHE) group scheduled work to understand factors influencing the classification profile. In Northern Ireland, the Annual Performance Review (APR) process includes assurance statements from a provider's governing body on degree standards and the scrutiny of student data.

### DEGREE OUTCOMES STATEMENTS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

In England and Wales, degree outcomes statements consolidate the commitment of providers with degree-awarding powers to review and publish student outcomes data, alongside relevant policies and factors influencing these. The internal review of degree classifications is also a route by which providers can assure themselves that they meet the expectations of the *UK Quality Code* (QAA, 2018a), specifically in areas relating to protecting the value of qualifications – and in England, help in understanding how they perform on condition of registration B4.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the development of degree outcomes statements is important for public accountability and assurance within the sector. Collectively, their publication increases evidence across the sector and facilitates institutions in sharing and implementing good practice widely.

As autonomous bodies, providers may choose different mechanisms to assure themselves of their degree standards. To support providers, UUK, GuildHE and QAA (2019a) published guidance setting out the areas providers should cover in their review of their degree outcomes, the method they should adopt and how they should present the results. Alongside this, QAA (2019) published a checklist to aid governing bodies as they review the degree outcomes statements. To support the sector in engaging with this process, QAA hosted workshops attended by 114 members, and two webinars with 85 participants.

<sup>6</sup> Publishing a degree outcomes statement will help to assure you that you are meeting your expectations, but it will not in itself satisfy regulatory responsibilities.

## Producing degree outcomes statements

In recognition of the burden of the Covid-19 pandemic on the sector, UKSCQA (2020a) issued a statement in May 2020 asking providers to aim to publish degree outcomes statements by the end of the 2019–20 academic year, or at the end of the calendar year at the latest.<sup>7</sup> At the time of writing (December 2020), 61 institutions had published their degree outcomes statements, including 58 from England and three from Wales. Further engagement with the sector suggests we are on course for all providers to be publishing their statements by the end of January 2021. Through a sector survey in autumn 2020, more detailed questions about the production and content of degree outcomes statements were explored. Responses were received from 32 providers across England and 6 in Wales with their views on the degree outcomes statements process. In addition to the 61 statements that have been published, 15 providers indicated that they intend to publish shortly. No provider from England or Wales who responded to the survey indicated that they did not intend to produce a statement. However, the extent to which provider responses to the survey are weighted towards those already engaged with this work is unclear.

Overall, the survey indicated that 82% found reviewing student outcomes and publishing degree outcomes statements to be a useful process. Responses highlighted the opportunity to reflect on current practice and identify areas for further work. The guidance received praise for encouraging providers to undertake wide-ranging reviews across their regulations. For a minority of providers, the exercise was not considered useful, citing the additional administration required to bring together work that is already scrutinised, particularly in the light of the drive to reduce bureaucracy. There were also queries related to the intended audience of the statements and whether providers were expected to advertise them. However, this was set against a desire to adopt and meet good practice in the sector and the intention for the statements to have as much utility as possible.

The majority (63%) of respondents found that undertaking an institutional review and publishing a degree outcomes statement was an easy task to complete. Most providers drew on existing reviews and quality assurance processes, meaning that data was easily accessible. Those who cited more difficulty in completing the task noted the pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic, which coincided with the development of the statements. Many who found the exercise more burdensome acknowledged that future reviews will be less resource intensive, given that they will have completed the initial work in assembling the document.

Every provider responding to the survey referred to the guidance (QAA, UUK and GuildHE, 2019a) on producing and publishing degree outcomes statements. The guidance suggested that the statement should be short and link to other work to ensure it is a concise document. However, some responses said that the short length acted as a constraint, given the significant content required. For clarity, the degree outcomes statement is intended to provide an assurance statement that a thorough review has taken place and to stand as a yardstick against which future activity can be evaluated. Given the size of the document, providers needed to decide which areas to focus on, basing their judgement on what would be of greatest benefit to the intended audience.

To ensure the degree outcomes statements themselves were sufficiently scrutinised, their approval process was explored in the survey. From the sample of providers, 84% engaged with their students when producing the statement. The remaining 16% had not done so yet but intended to. Largely this occurred through student representation in academic governance structures. In some cases, this was supplemented by inviting students' unions to comment on advanced drafts. All but one institution's governing body or equivalent reviewed and approved the statement before publication, giving the statements credibility at senior level and helping to equip governors with information to discharge their academic governance responsibilities. Another assurance mechanism was for providers to seek external scrutiny and advice when developing the statement: 73% of respondents had contracted or intended to contract an external expert to review the statement and/or had worked with their external examiners to support the review. However, many providers said that as the statement had gone through multiple internal committees and reviews from governors, they judged that the statement had been sufficiently scrutinised.

<sup>7</sup> For providers in Wales, HEFCW set the expected deadline at the end of the calendar year 2020.

Partner organisations without degree-awarding powers were not expected to complete their own statements. The guidance nevertheless set out an expectation that degree-awarding bodies would actively involve partners who deliver academic provision in the production of the statements. Where partners were consulted, this was through early sharing of drafts or through their representation on academic boards. However, in line with feedback from a roundtable with validated institutions, engagement was partial and not consistent. This was particularly challenging for some providers where there were multiple validators and therefore multiple academic regulations for a partner provider to take into account. In other cases, the challenge was the pressure of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. There is an underlying concern, however, among partner providers that to protect the value of degree classifications, more engagement and collaboration is needed across all teaching providers.

## CONTENT AND GOOD PRACTICE OF PUBLICATIONS

A review of the statements shows providers have produced meaningful documents that bring together numerous activities in a way that is concise and readable to external stakeholders. The average length is approximately five pages, although many providers have supplemented this with additional data tables. The following review brings together the key themes that run through the majority of degree outcomes statements, based on an analysis of 61 degree outcomes statements and 38 survey responses.

### Institutional degree classification profile

All providers published their classification profile with trends over time. Providers:

- benchmarked their data against sector trends, in the context of the institution's profile
- considered the distribution of outcomes across cohorts, disciplines and study modes, with particular attention to ethnicity and entry qualifications<sup>8</sup>
- summarised targets and actions within their access and participation plans (APPs), or equivalent
- cited good practice and improvements made to internal monitoring of outcome data, for example through dashboards and wider accessibility of data to staff

### Assessment and marking practices

Provider submissions evidenced:

- close alignment with sector reference points and compliance with the UK Quality Code (QAA, 2018a)<sup>9</sup>
- assurances of sector comparability and consistency
- embedded sector reference points, by having them as a prerequisite to programme validation, revalidation and quality review
- commitment to strengthening and engaging external expertise for degree classification, for example through reference to the QAA (2018b) guidance on the recruitment of external examiners, and scrutiny and ratification of assessment and benchmarking
- engagement with the Advance HE degree standards programme as a mechanism to share practice and consistency, in respect of second marking, sampling and moderation practices<sup>10</sup>
- instances of good practice, including asking examiners to comment on the quality and standards of awards with reference to the FHEQ descriptors, subject benchmark statements and classification trends over time

<sup>8</sup> Characteristics that outcomes were often presented against were: ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic background, fee status, entry qualification, and mode and subject of study.

<sup>9</sup> Examples of reference points include mapping course outcomes to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), subject benchmark statements and PSRB guidance, and the UKSCQA-led degree classification descriptors (QAA, 2019c).

<sup>10</sup> See also section 5 below.

## Academic governance

Governance arrangements referred to in degree outcomes statements had clear accountability and reporting structures to assure providers that the value of qualifications is protected over time.

Providers:

- consistently set out the governance arrangements and responsibilities for awards and assessment, including delegation to an awards board, examination committee or equivalent
- subjected individual programmes to annual course monitoring and periodic reviews that feed into the reporting structure
- demonstrated good practice in the composition of such boards including an external examiner (or chief external examiner)
- made annual submissions to boards of governors on degree classification trends<sup>11</sup>
- described the structures used to protect the comparability of awards made through franchised, subcontracted or externally validated provision, including through early engagement with partners, moderation and marking standardisation, reporting to partnership boards, and consulting partners on the appointment of external examiners<sup>12</sup>
- disaggregated classification data for partners and worked with them to understand any differences

## Classification algorithms

Almost all providers were able to succinctly define their classification algorithm design(s) using non-technical language appropriate for external stakeholders.<sup>13</sup> However, in some instances, there was an absence of pedagogical rationale, which would have furthered the understanding across the sector – and among students and the wider public – of why particular decisions have been made. Elsewhere, providers:

- had explored how to make degree outcomes easier for students to monitor, such as through the provision of degree calculators or targeted guidance
- had, through such measures, increased transparency and empowered students to better understand their own achievement, ensuring they receive the maximum value from their studies
- had witnessed behavioural change and, among students, consequently improved performances, while also recognising that further classification improvements would be legitimate and achieve closer alignment with a student's actual achievement

## Teaching practices and learning resources

Principally, providers' changes to teaching practice and learning resources came from the overriding aim to improve the outcomes of students and their experience. Providers:

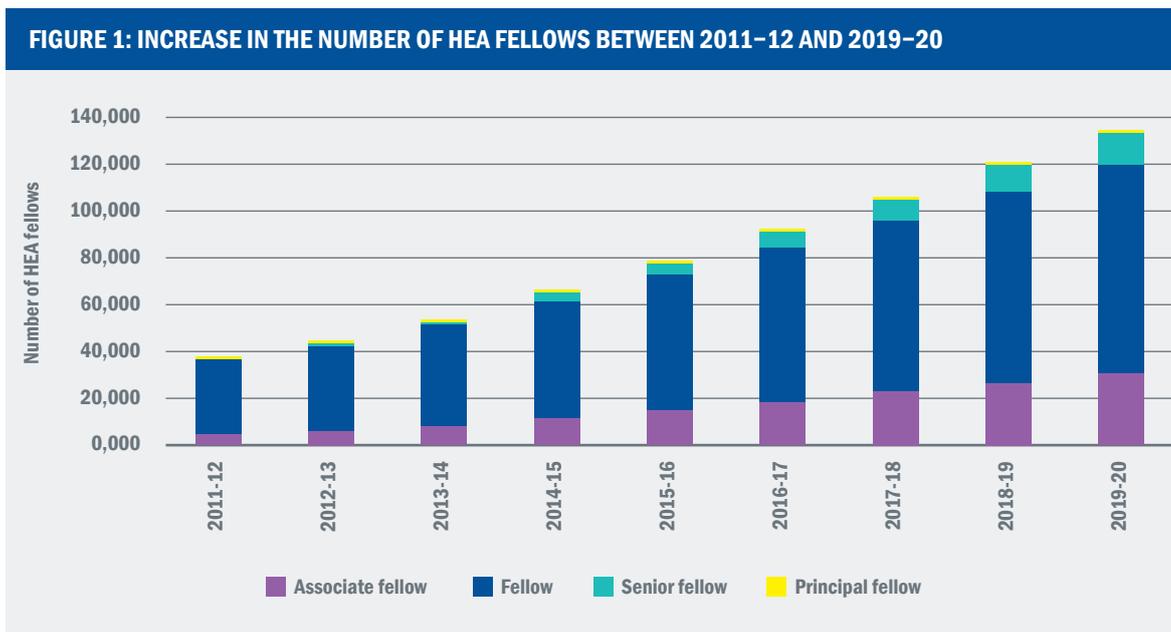
- reflected on the fact that changes to teaching and learning affect students' degree classification by influencing the marks that contribute to it
- described capital investment in teaching and study space, which correlated with increases in library visits and resource request rates, better use of virtual learning environments, enhanced delivery of feedback, more inclusive learning and strengthening of capacity for wellbeing
- expressed difficulty in quantifying the discernible effects on degree classifications from these investments, underlining the complexity of factors that influence a degree award
- reported ambitious targets to increase the number of teaching staff with Postgraduate Certificates in Higher Education, for example through national and internal fellowships

<sup>11</sup> For providers in England, the assurance statement is the mechanism by which compliance with the Ongoing Conditions of Registration are monitored.

<sup>12</sup> Teaching partners were not always consulted during the production of the guidance. Where relevant, this is an area providers should take forward in future reviews: see also *Principles and guidance for collaborative teaching partnerships during the pandemic* (UUK, AoC & IHE, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> See also section 4 below.

- had supported all new teaching staff to achieve fellowships in higher education teaching or equivalent (see Figure 1, which shows the accumulative increase in the number of Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellows which as of 2019–20 is 134,265)



### Risks and challenges

In terms of the risks and challenges reported, there were differences between providers:

- Smaller providers noted that minor changes in degree profiles and/or small cohorts can translate to significant differences in percentage terms, demonstrating the importance of contextual data and assessment of the cause and extent of changes over time.
- Providers who had changed or revalidated their course portfolios or had recently achieved degree-awarding powers reported challenges in predicting degree outcomes for the initial graduating cohorts of newly validated programmes.
- Many statements reflected that the future impact of Covid-19 posed uncertainty and risk to the sector, in part due to the changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices, and in part because of the heavy administrative burden and resource requirements.
- The pandemic has also had a detrimental impact on planned initiatives, which may take longer to initiate or implement than in normal times.
- Providers emphasised the importance of monitoring the risks associated with emergency regulations and guidelines in future degree outcomes statements.
- Providers reflected on the challenge of combining their work to close attainment gaps for different student groups in order to improve degree outcomes for historically low attainment groups, while simultaneously ensuring the value of degree outcomes over time.

## ACTIONS AND FUTURE DEGREE OUTCOMES STATEMENTS

In addition to assuring providers of their existing processes, the degree outcomes statements are an opportunity to set actions and identify areas for further work. Although this was not a requirement, 63% of providers did set actions as a result of producing their degree outcomes statements. Most frequently, these were in the areas of:

- algorithm design (61%)
- further data analysis of outcomes (52%)
- assessment design (35%)
- changes to regulation (35%)

Overall, the recurrent actions providers report having taken align with UKSCQA and QAA guidance, indicating the promise that degree outcomes statements hold in leading to tangible steps to protect degree standards.

Within algorithm design, many providers:

- committed to reviewing their degree algorithms with reference to UKSCQA guidance and principles developed by UUK and GuildHE, with particular attention to the criteria for borderline marks, the use of multiple algorithms and limiting discounting
- recognised that more could be done to improve the transparency of degree algorithms to ensure they are student focused, through resources such as online calculators
- made improvements to their monitoring of infrastructure, through dashboards and analytics software, and deep-dive analysis of demographics or subject areas to better understand differential outcomes and so inform algorithm design
- recognised assessment and assessment design as the foundations on which a student's marks and resulting classification are based
- signalled the need to draw from the degree outcomes statement when reviewing assessment practice and making decisions about future assessment
- considered the development of institution-wide codes of practice to ensure consistency in marking and moderation

Additional measures to support externality involved providers:

- exploring the use of calibration activities both internally and in collaboration with others
- strengthening exam boards or their equivalents, included standardising agendas and offering more training for chairs
- reassessing the data issued to external examiners, giving more sector- and discipline-level background and historical context
- setting actions to introduce a principal or chief external examiner to provide oversight across the whole institution's standards

Looking forward, providers were asked whether they intend to revisit and review their degree outcomes statement in the future. This would allow providers to monitor progress from the actions and update the documents to capture changes in practice and new data. Particularly for the 2019–20 academic year, the statements offer an opportunity to set out the response to, and effects of, the Covid-19 pandemic on students' outcomes. Early indications suggest that 61% intend to review the statement after a specific time or incorporate the statement into existing review processes. For most providers, they have suggested this would involve revisiting the degree outcomes statement annually. However, a significant minority had yet to conclude when the statement would be reviewed and were awaiting guidance as to what good practice would look like in the sector. The remaining providers did not rule out future reviews and noted they would monitor whether a full review was necessary.

## CLASSIFICATION IN SCOTLAND

In November 2020, the Quality Arrangements for Scottish Higher Education (QASHE) group met and reaffirmed its position that the outcomes within the statement of intent are secured through the Scottish sector's Quality Enhancement Framework. Progress in relation to the statement of intent comes through Scotland's ongoing work in quality assurance and enhancement led by autonomous institutions within a framework that includes periodic enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) for all institutions. QASHE also emphasised the current circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to recognise the recent changes to assessment and entry requirements when analysing degree outcomes.

## CLASSIFICATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The statement of intent in Northern Ireland is secured through the Annual Performance Review (APR) process. This includes assurance statements from a provider's governing body, focusing on continuous improvement of students' academic experiences and outcomes; the steps taken to assure (with externality) degree standards at all classification levels, especially at the threshold level; and the scrutiny of student and other data already submitted to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Department for Education – Northern Ireland (DfE-NI) and presented as an 'APR dashboard'. Through this process, providers in Northern Ireland are continuing to reflect on their degree classification profile and associated regulations and activities.

# 3: ENSURING STRETCH AND CHALLENGE

## UK higher education institutions will continue to protect the value of degrees by:

- ensuring assessment and classification criteria stretch and challenge all their students, including meeting and exceeding shared sector qualifications criteria

## DEGREE CLASSIFICATION DESCRIPTORS

Degree classification is a marker of how a student has performed overall in their degree programme upon the qualification being awarded. The statement of intent recognised the importance of a shared understanding across the UK of what is meant by a given classification. Moreover, it recognised that providers should engage in continual reflection on how curricula and assessments adhere to these descriptors while continuing to enhance teaching and learning.

Providers across the UK were already using several sector reference points to assure themselves of comparability. The statement of intent, for example, builds on existing expectations such as the *UK Quality Code* (QAA, 2018a) and the FHEQ. These frameworks set out a baseline of requirements for awarding of degrees. However, the research that informed the statement of intent highlighted the absence of sector-recognised descriptors for different degree classifications. Despite the majority of the sector using the same classification schema for Bachelor's degrees with honours (first, 2:1, 2:2 and third) and typically ascribing the same marks, nowhere had the sector previously agreed what these levels of attainment reflected.<sup>14</sup>

The publication of *Degree classification descriptors* (QAA, 2019b), developed following a UK-wide consultation, fills this gap and sets out common descriptors of the four main degree outcome classifications for Bachelor's degrees with honours. This output was in part a response to the concerns of the then-universities minister in England Jo Johnson (2017), who called on the sector to 'define and agree sector-recognised standards for all classifications of degrees'. At the most fundamental level, each classification means that students have achieved the learning outcomes to be awarded a degree at Level 6 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and Level 10 in Scotland of the respective qualification frameworks, but to differing extents. The descriptors reflect attainment across knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, practical skills, transferable skills and, where relevant, professional competences. These have been positioned at a level high enough to apply across different programmes and courses, ensuring some level of comparability and consistency across disciplines. However, it is still for autonomous institutions to provide more detailed and course-specific descriptors to students and staff, based on these high-level, universal descriptors.

Following agreement from UKSCQA, the descriptors were annexed to the UK Quality Code (QAA, 2018a), which is applicable across the UK. However, because the four nations of the UK have different regulatory and quality architectures, the use of the descriptors vary. In Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, the descriptors do not form part of the regulatory or quality assurance systems and function as advice only. However, providers regulated in England and registered with the OfS must ensure that courses meet the sector-recognised standards set out in the Regulatory framework for higher education in England (OfS, 2018). At the time of writing (December 2020), the OfS is consulting on the incorporation of the descriptors in England into the regulatory framework.

<sup>14</sup> Typically, although not always, the following classification boundaries are used: first ( $\geq 70$ ), upper-second (60–69), lower-second (50–59), third (40–49), pass (35–40). Alternative scales, for example between 1 and 20, are also used by some degree-awarding bodies. Whatever marking scale is used, the final classification nevertheless must align with sector reference points.

## USE OF DESCRIPTORS

Positively, 76% of providers UK-wide have used or intend to use the new sector-wide descriptors within their institution. For example, approximately 37% of our surveyed institutions intend to engage in mapping exercises with their existing and sector-level classification descriptors. A further 35% will use the descriptors to inform course design and approval. Approximately one-third will use the descriptors to inform staff development, and 27% will extend this to the training for external examiners. This is promising and supports the intention of the descriptors, which is to support training purposes and internal reflection, rather than providing a stringent rubric.

Before the publication of sector-wide descriptors, 88% of providers had institution-wide classification descriptors and approximately 33% had them at subject level. Institutions that only used subject-level classification descriptors were less likely to reference the sector-wide descriptors. Noticeably, six responses expressed reservations about the value of the descriptors. They referenced their generic form, which it was felt would not add value over the institution's existing descriptors.

It is not the intention for sector-wide descriptors to substitute those that are institutionally developed. Their role is to support consistency and act as a useful reference point. Furthermore, institutions are autonomous, and it is right that they have responsibility for setting their own assessment criteria.

## 4: EFFECTIVE CALCULATION OF CLASSIFICATIONS

### UK higher education institutions will continue to protect the value of degrees by:

- reviewing and explaining how their process for calculating final classifications:
  - fully reflects student attainment against learning criteria
  - protects the integrity of classification boundary conventions
  - maintains comparability of qualifications in the sector and over time

### UPDATE AGAINST RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 2017 REPORT

A degree algorithm is the process or set of rules that institutions follow to determine the final classification of a course. This is an area in which UKSCQA has had sustained engagement since 2017. To understand the extent of progress since then, we can reflect on the seven recommendations made in *Understanding degree algorithms* (UUK & GuildHE, 2017). Research undertaken across all four nations in 2020 found that many providers had already made considerable changes to practice, with progress particularly evident in the move towards rule-based approaches, clear boundary conventions and the declining use of discounting.<sup>15</sup>

- The use of borderline policies that operate solely through academic discretion decreased from 24% in 2017 to 13% in 2020.
- 2020 saw an increase in the proportion of providers using all credits from the agreed level that are part of the classification calculation, from 57% in 2017 to 68% in 2020.

There were several areas where further progress was felt to be required, particularly towards greater transparency of algorithm design for students and stakeholders.

- In 2020, half of respondents provided additional materials to explain algorithm design in the form of interactive guides, calculators or examples.
- Just 12% of institutions supplement their algorithm guidance with an explanatory rationale explaining why a particular algorithm design had been chosen.
- Approximately 30% of institutions use multiple algorithms for individual students. Where this practice exists, providers award the highest classification produced.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the recommendations from 2017, progress is identifiable by the extent to which providers have reviewed or intend to review their degree algorithms. In 2020, 71% of providers were either currently conducting a review or had done so since 2015–16. This compares similarly to the findings in 2017, where 70% had undertaken a review since 2012–13. It is important that algorithms remain relevant and are regularly reviewed. Responses to the survey suggest that the rate of review is likely to increase. Many providers in England and Wales have noted in their degree outcomes statements that they would build on this exercise to review their algorithms, using the algorithm principles as a reference point.

<sup>15</sup> The following analysis should be interpreted with some caution because of the differing sample size from research in 2017 (n=120) and 2020 (n=69).

<sup>16</sup> See Annexe B for an update on progress against these recommendations.

## DEGREE ALGORITHM PRINCIPLES

Overall, while the research showed that the sector has taken action since 2017, it was also clear that there is further to go. Building on the statement of intent commitment and update in *Understanding degree algorithms* (UUK & GuildHE, 2017), UKSCQA asked UUK and GuildHE to develop further guidance on degree algorithms. Consultation with the sector on what this might look like produced 69 institutional responses, and four workshops were held for 127 attendees. In July 2020, the UK sector committed to the *Principles for effective degree algorithm design* (UUK & GuildHE, 2020a) to protect the value of qualifications over time. It was established that to be effective, an algorithm must:

- provide an appropriate and reliable summary of a student's performance against the learning outcomes, reflecting the design, delivery and structure of a degree programme
- fairly reflect a student's performance without unduly over-emphasising particular aspects, with consideration being taken at the design stage of how each element within a method of classification interacts with other elements
- protect academic standards by adhering to the current conventions and national reference points used to define classification bands and boundaries
- normally be reviewed at least every five years, or alongside national cyclical review timetables, to ensure algorithms remain relevant and appropriate, with input from across the provider, including students, academic and non-academic staff and accrediting bodies
- be designed and reviewed in a way that is mindful of the impact of different calculation approaches to classification for different groups of students
- be communicated and explained clearly to students, both in how it works and why

This is a significant step and marks the first time the sector has committed to UK-wide algorithm design principles. This action will help ensure algorithms fully reflect student attainment and protect boundary conventions. The principles received widespread support from across the sector and from the QAA's student strategic advisory committee. The higher education sector is diverse, and it is right that algorithms continue to reflect different pedagogical rationales and support innovative learning. Together, however, the principles assure the sector that variation does not undermine the broader commitment to protect the value of qualifications over time.

To complement the principles, UKSCQA produced several specific models of effective practice that institutions should consider (UUK & GuildHE, 2020a, pp.6–9). These models offer clear recommendations to providers and identify ways to mitigate the risk of inflationary potential in an algorithm. However, it is an institution's responsibility and role to ensure that any adopted models of practice remain appropriate for the provision to which it applies and that reviews consider the combined output and context of an algorithm.

In summary, in these models of practice:

- degree algorithms are typically based on one of four rationales and associated weightings<sup>17</sup>
- where possible, providers keep weighting variations outside these to a minimum, to ensure sector-wide comparability and stability of outcomes
- discounting is applied to a minimum number of credits, to ensure a student's classification reflects their performance (algorithms should not discount credits from Level 6/10 or of core and compulsory modules)
- zones of consideration (also known as borderline policies) are no more than two percentage points from the grade boundary and classification adjustment within this is rule based and anonymously judged
- rounding of marks should only occur once, ideally at the final classification stage rather than at the module level
- where possible, only one algorithm calculates a student's classification

The proposals will tighten up processes and redouble the importance of transparency so that students, employers and staff can understand both how the algorithm works and the rationale behind it. They also support the move away from academic discretion, emphasising the boundaries and ensuring the output of the algorithm accurately reflects students' achievement.

## ACTIONS RELATED TO ALGORITHM DESIGN

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the recentness of the publication of the algorithm principles, providers will not have undertaken significant activity or engagement yet at an institutional level. Nevertheless, among their initial reflections on the principles, all but one survey respondent contributing to this progress review in September 2020 were aware that the algorithm design guidance had been produced and published. When asked whether they intend to use the guidance, 47 of the 49 respondents noted they would. The majority of providers indicated that the guidance would be used to reference against common practice in the sector (79%) and the principles will be taken forward during the next algorithm review (73%). Other, less prominent uses of the guidance, include identifying where unintentional additive effects may emerge (40%), to improve student communication and algorithm transparency (33%) and to inform future degree outcomes statements (33%).

Another indication of how providers in England and Wales are engaging with degree algorithm design has come from their inclusion within degree outcomes statements. Of those providers who set actions from producing the statement, 61% indicated changes to algorithm design. Commitments related to undertaking reviews to consider borderline, discretion, transparency and rationale policies. The degree outcomes statement has supported providers to articulate their algorithm design rationale. Transparency was also important, with many providers exploring how to make degree outcomes easier for students to monitor, for example by creating a degree calculator or targeted guidance. Providers said this was particularly important in 2019–20, when newly introduced 'no-detriment' or 'safety-net' policies needed to be explained.

Providers that have suggested they would not use the algorithm guidance at this stage referred to recent reviews that are due to be implemented. It is right that where action has already been taken, for example on the back of the *Understanding degree algorithms* (UUK & GuildHE, 2017), the sector is not over-burdened by an expectation of an immediate 'rereview'. However, once implemented, as the principles suggest, we would expect these institutions to reflect on their new algorithm design regularly and to refine it, in the light of the new principles. Building on this work, QAA intend to deliver workshops in early 2021, supported by UUK and GuildHE, to help providers reflect on the principles and their implementation where appropriate.

<sup>17</sup> The four suggested models are as follows and reflect the number of levels within three- and four-year degrees. Exit velocity (0/0/100 or 0/0/0/100), emphasis on exit velocity (0/33/67 or 0/0/25/75), equal weighting (0/50/50 or 0/0/50/50) and Level 4/8 inclusion (10/30/60 or 0/10/30/60).

# 5: STRENGTHENING EXTERNALITY

## UK higher education institutions will continue to protect the value of degrees by:

- enabling staff to protect the value of qualifications by:
  - supporting opportunities for academics to work as external examiners, including professional development and subject calibration activities
  - supporting new and existing academics and external examiners to apply institutional assessment criteria and regulations
  - reviewing and reiterating policies on internal and external moderation to ensure they enable challenge

A commitment to externality is a key way in which providers assure themselves that the qualifications they deliver are comparable across the sector. Strong externality processes run through UKSCQA's outputs from sector-wide algorithm principles to classification reference points. More precisely, this commitment to strengthen externality is related to how academic staff within and across providers can be empowered and supported in their roles as assessment designers, markers and external examiners. Providers may have enabled staff to protect the value of qualifications through engagement with Advance HE's professional development course for external examiners, or through other activities and initiatives at a provider level or alongside other providers.

## EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

A cornerstone of how academic staff confirm standards and quality across the sector is through the external examiner system. Examiners must be properly supported in their roles to enable them to assess and challenge practice where necessary to protect the value of qualifications. Many institutions have developed their own internal training to accomplish this. Advance HE, with support from national funders and regulators, has developed a common training package for external examiners to aid consistency of practice.

### Strengthening external examiners

Institutions have strengthened their external examiner system in a variety of ways, with 87% of surveyed institutions making changes since the statement of intent in May 2019. Since the statement of intent, just over half (55%) of providers have developed additional guidance for external examiners, including:

- training and mentoring for newly inducted examiners
- asking examiners to reflect on degree classification trends (43%), through the production of data packs for examiners and asking for assurance of standards between cohorts
- the appointment of a chief external examiner or equivalent to give oversight across the whole provider, a practice that was seen as particularly valuable when changes to assessment were made in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and in the production of the degree outcomes statement<sup>18</sup>
- taking steps to increase the number of staff trained to be external examiners elsewhere, which was seen as important for assuring comparability, and as a mechanism for sharing good practice
- developing external examiner training for individuals, or supporting the training provided through Advance HE and its work to increase consistency across the sector, although there was awareness of limited availability and a requirement for greater reach

<sup>18</sup> Although the UKSCQA (2018b) consultation report showed uncertainty with regard to the value of an 'external advisor on academic standards', responses in the context of producing degree outcomes statements were more positive.

## Advance HE's degree standards project

The degree standards project is a five-year project led by Advance HE and managed by the Office for Students on behalf of England and the devolved administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland. It is one of UKSCQA's programmes of work and is designed to improve the training of external examiners.

### Sector engagement with the project

The sector has been significantly involved in the design and delivery of the project since 2016:

- Fifty-one providers have adopted the blended professional development course (PDC) to train their own staff as external examiners, with 23 doing so since the publication of the statement of intent, and 2,664 participants having completed the course in blended or online modes.
- Eight providers were engaged in the design and piloting of a blended PDC taking place in Belfast, Birmingham, London and York. The Open University advised on the development of a fully online version.

### Impact of the PDC

Aim Higher Research and Consultancy (now DEWR) evaluated the impact of the PDC, based on feedback from participants. Its report concluded that 'the PDC is credible across the academic community: all sections of higher education have been involved, the feedback is very positive and there is appetite for using the PDC materials in different contexts' (ARC, 2018, p.2). More specifically, the course has:

- enhanced staff understanding of the role of the external examiner, particularly in respect of being a guardian of national standards
- increased confidence in staff ability to carry out external examination effectively
- led to changes in staff practice

### Calibration of academic standards

The PDC can only do so much to improve the comparability of degree standards. Assessment is rooted in disciplinary practice, so the project has designed and piloted subject-based calibration activities in collaboration with several professional bodies and subject associations, including the Royal Geographical Society, Conservatoires UK and the British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences. These involve staff in the same discipline from across the UK coming together to develop common criteria for assessing students. These events have demonstrated to participants that different standards emerge in their own discipline.

### Next steps

It is important that additional steps are taken to further professionalise external examining. These include:

- putting training provision on a secure and sustainable footing once the project ends
- encouraging providers to adopt the PDC and to engage in regular calibration of academic standards across all disciplines

Taken together, the professional development of external examiners and the regular engagement of academic staff in calibration activities can make an important contribution to ensuring greater comparability and reliability of academic standards.

## FURTHER ENHANCEMENTS TO EXTERNALITY

In their degree outcomes statements, institutions in England and Wales noted the many internal steps they have taken and intend to take to support externality. This was echoed by providers across all four nations in their responses to our progress review survey. Conversations have also been had across the UK through UKSCQA to understand what more can be done to support providers in this work. Building on the work of Advance HE, it is essential that staff across the UK are effectively introduced and trained on external examining, but also that subject disciplines and particular pedagogical considerations are brought into the fold. There was great interest in developing and building on calibration activities from a sector-wide perspective to supplement existing training. This came from the desire that comparability of outcomes must recognise distinct subject nuances. Giving pedagogical considerations greater emphasis will ensure external assurance is responsive, dynamic and close to the assessment content and design process. Beyond subject communities, this could also be explored through calibration partnerships with groups of degree-awarding bodies to ensure common standards.

## 6: EMERGING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Degree-awarding bodies have experienced significant upheaval in their standard delivery models during the Covid-19 pandemic. New and additional practices have been developed to support students during this time, bringing to the fore the importance of transparency and clear explanations where policies have changed. Any temporary measures will need to balance the continued standard of qualifications against potential disruption and new circumstances of teaching, learning and assessment. Extraordinary circumstances may require consideration of subject or programme learning objectives and whether these are met across assessments. It is right that students can continue to be proud of their achievements in 2019–20. It is also the case that universities must uphold quality and rigour to protect the high-quality offer.

With the desire for a more flexible higher education system and the introduction of innovative ways of learning, it is also right that the sector considers how it will continue to protect the value of qualifications within this changing context.

### FLEXIBLE STUDY

The move towards more flexible modes of study has the potential to significantly strengthen the sector's offer to students. Polling commissioned by UUK showed that 82% of prospective students in England who are unemployed, at risk of unemployment or looking to learn new skills would be keen to study individual modules of a university degree (UUK, 2020). This surge in interest, if sustained, will require consideration of how these policies will support students over time, particularly in the context of credit transfer, cumulative degree awards and degree classification.

QAA is currently reviewing and updating the Credit Framework in England, and future iterations of this report will reflect on these changes. Currently, standard sector practice is not to carry grades from exemption credit or records of prior learning. This may mean that classifications are calculated by drawing on a smaller pool of student achievement. Comparability of classifications may be more difficult to achieve if movement between institutions, precipitated by more flexible study patterns, becomes more common. Algorithms will need to consider how to capture past performance without undue complexity, and with confidence that classification descriptors hold sector comparability. Providers may also want to consider whether exit awards are introduced at other levels within the FHEQ, and how these should be awarded, classified and communicated to students.

Students studying part time or through modular study may be inadvertently affected where the currency of a course depends on a specific completion date to achieve accredited status. Requirements that students learn the latest curriculum content may not cater for learners who wish to study flexibly over several years. Furthermore, in taking part in prolonged periods of study and/or studying credits at a number of institutions, students may be assessed over a range of different regulatory and assessment practices, giving rise to questions about how to provide students with consistent and clear information on degree classification. The Covid-19 pandemic has also given rise to greater opportunities for online or blended studies. Where assessments have changed due to this format, the same standards and course outcomes should be met. However, it is the case that historically some PSRBs will also have requirements and views on the extent to which professional competences can be assessed online. It will be crucial to engage with PSRBs as these policies develop.

### EMPLOYER-BASED LEARNING

Degree-awarding bodies have less control over employer-based learning due to the external components of these programmes. Across providers, there is variability in the extent to which employer-based learning is integrated with campus learning. Capturing the students' performance is challenging and involves liaising with multiple employers and agreeing on common assessment parameters. Many placements are awarded a simple pass or fail. As employer-based learning continues to play an important role in course outcomes, providers may consider how work placements might contribute to a student's classification.

## FUTURE AREAS TO PURSUE

As a result of the statement of intent, this review finds a sector that is better equipped to take action to protect degree standards. However, the significance of the challenge presented by grade inflation means that UKSCQA and individual providers must be attentive to further areas for exploration and development to ensure that degree standards continue to be strengthened.

The UK higher education sector is committed to strengthening further the covenant made within the statement of intent, including pursuing work to:

- Build an understanding of how changes to teaching, learning and assessment brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic relate to degree classification in the immediate and medium term. This should include consideration of the lessons learned over the period and reflection on the wider pedagogical implications of increasingly diverse forms and modes of provision.
- Encourage providers in England and Wales to revisit their degree outcomes statements a year after publication to include data from 2019–20 so as to reflect on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on degree classification while also evaluating progress against planned activities. Providers that have not yet published their initial degree outcomes statement will be expected to do so by the end of January 2021.
- Engage with QAA, the Office for Students (OfS), and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to consider the lessons learned from the first round of degree outcomes statements in England and Wales and to understand the opportunities for strengthening the co-regulatory approach to maintaining degree standards. This should involve updating guidance on degree outcomes statements to provide further clarity and include good practice examples. We also recommend more attention is paid by providers to OfS analysis of unexplained classification improvement and HEFCW analysis of classification trends.
- Explore opportunities for enhancing providers' internal quality assurance processes (for example, annual monitoring, periodic review and programme accreditation) and work to improve the transparency and understanding of these externally.
- Enable governing bodies to take a more robust approach as part of their role in overseeing and interrogating degree outcomes.
- Build on the external examiners work of Advance HE, considering further ways of strengthening externality. This might include working with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and learned societies to develop more subject-based calibration activities to support sector comparability, as well as sector-wide activity to establish clear standards of practice.
- Engage with governments to work with league table compilers to assess the use and presentation of a 'good degrees' metric, considering this within wider discussions of how to ensure students can access information to decide what and where to study.
- Raise the profile of both the statement of intent and the sector's commitments and activities at a provider-level to protect the value of qualifications with employers and public audiences, so that students' attainment is appropriately recognised.
- Develop further guidance on maintaining quality and standards in collaborative teaching partnerships whether delivered through validated, franchised or transnational provision. This guidance should outline the necessary considerations for maintaining quality and standards in the complex arrangements resulting from multiple partners or partnerships with degree-awarding bodies.

UUK and GuildHE will undertake a UK-wide stocktake of activity in a year's time to monitor the extent and impact of this work, with the potential for more in-depth reviews of specific strands of work at appropriate later stages. Where appropriate across all four UK nations, UKSCQA will continue to provide an important forum to ensure a UK-wide approach to maintaining academic standards and quality.

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# ANNEXE A: METHODOLOGY

To assess progress made against the 2019 statement of intent, UKSCQA has reviewed the impact of work by UUK, GuildHE and QAA. Each section provides an overview of activity undertaken by UKSCQA to support the sector and outlines how the sector has taken this forward. To support future work, the report identifies examples of good practice and actions providers have set. This review's structure responds in turn to each of the four central areas of the statement of intent:

- reviewing student outcomes data
- ensuring stretch and challenge
- effective calculation of classifications
- strengthening externality

The main method of data collection was through a survey for providers with degree-awarding powers. The survey opened on 11 September and closed on 16 October 2020, receiving 49 responses (32 from institutions based in England, 11 in Scotland and six in Wales). To complement the survey and understand the perspectives of teaching partnerships through franchised, subcontracted, or validated provision, a virtual roundtable was hosted on 5 October 2020. With support from Independent HE (IHE) and the Association of Colleges (AoC), 14 representatives attended the roundtable, exploring how the statement of intent had been taken forward in the context of teaching partnerships.

To better understand the content of the degree outcomes statements, a review of the key themes of 61 statements was conducted. To understand the change in degree algorithm design since 2017, data from the *Degree algorithm practice in 2020: research report* (UUK & GuildHE, 2020b) was used. Finally, Advance HE has contributed to this report by providing a case study on its degree standards project to support external examiners.

# ANNEXE B: DEGREE ALGORITHM PROGRESS 2017–2020

2017 recommendations	2020 update on progress
<b>One:</b> Guidance on design principles should be included as part of the UK Quality Code.	In July 2020, the sector published six principles and models of practice for effective algorithm design. While the <i>UK Quality Code</i> does not incorporate algorithm guidance, UKSCQA appended the principles to its statement of intent. Its publication combines and strengthens the commitment of the sector in a UK-wide document.
<b>Two:</b> Institutions should publish explanations for the design of their degree algorithms and update these explanations when adjustments are made.	Principle six commits the sector to greater transparency when communicating and explaining how an algorithm works. In 2020, the vast majority (91%) of providers published the technical rules of their degree algorithm(s). However, only 12% of institutions supplement their algorithm guidance with an explanatory rationale. This suggests institutions could take further steps to explain why a particular approach to classification has been adopted and how this corresponds to the structure of the degree and learning outcomes.
<b>Three:</b> External referencing of algorithm design is legitimate but should be motivated by robust pedagogical practice in the interests of students.	<p>The 2017 report recognises the importance of external referencing to identify where practice aligns with sector norms. The three most common motivators for institutions to change their algorithm in 2020 recognise these priorities: a) standardisation of practice across the institution; b) support comparability of qualifications; and c) protect boundary conventions.</p> <p>While providers have regard to external referencing, pedagogical rationale remains the most important component of algorithm design. Principle one affirms that degree algorithms must reflect the learning outcomes of a degree programme and within this its design, delivery and structure. The new guidance for providers retains their autonomy over programme design, enabling innovative teaching, learning and assessment. This can be shown through adjustments to meet the needs of students engaged in employer-based learning, integrated Master's courses, and entrance through credit or through meeting the requirements of PSRBs and learned societies.</p>
<b>Four:</b> Classification boundaries are clearly defined and institutions should not engage in activity that undermines this existing convention.	<p>Principle three ensures adherence to current conventions and national reference points that define classification bands and boundaries. Specifically, the use of borderline policies that operate solely through discretion decreased from 24% in 2017 to 13% in 2020. This continues a trend towards rule-based approaches, which improves consistency and protects the integrity of boundary conventions. To strengthen this, the algorithm models of practice recommend the maximum zone of consideration to be no more than 2% from the grade boundary.</p> <p>Additional models of practice concern rounding rules, which is considered arithmetically appropriate if within 0.5% of classification boundary. However, providers should avoid rounding at multiple stages, such as at both the module and classification level.</p>
<b>Five:</b> Institutions should review their regulations if they assess a student using more than one algorithm or only discount lowest grades.	<p>Principle two makes a strong commitment for providers to consider how elements of an algorithm combine and remain a reflection of learner achievement. The findings from 2020 suggest that 30% of institutions conduct some form of multiple calculations for individual students. Where this practice exists, providers award the highest classification. To respond to this concern, the models of practice recommends that where possible, only one algorithm should calculate a student's classification.</p> <p>Across the sector, providers are reducing their use of discounting policies. While in 2017 57% of providers used all credits for the classification calculation, 2020 saw it increase to 68% of providers. The 2017 report notes that discounting marks only at the lower end of achievement would lead to grade inflation. For one-third of respondents with a discounting policy, standard practice remains to discount the lowest grades. The models of practice recommend minimising discounting. This may include not discounting core, compulsory or final modules. Finally, providers should have a clear rationale for using discounting.</p>
<b>Six:</b> Degree algorithms should be transparent and accessible.	In 2020, to support students in understanding degree algorithm design, half of providers created additional materials in the form of interactive guides, calculators or examples. There are further opportunities for other providers to produce simplified guides or classification calculators. Similarly, institutions should consider the accessibility of these resources by assessing their presence on student-facing webpages.
<b>Seven:</b> Students should be involved in reviews of degree algorithms.	In 2017, all interviewed institutions consulted with their students during their last algorithm review. In 2020, consultation occurred 90% of the time. This connects to principle five, which encourages engagement with students representing a wide range of characteristics to help identify barriers to success.

Universities UK is the collective voice of 140 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Its mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world, maximising their positive impact locally, nationally and globally. Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.

This publication was conducted by Universities UK, GuildHE and the Quality Assurance Agency on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment. The UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment 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.

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December 2020