

# PROTECTING THE VALUE OF UK DEGREES:

REVIEWING PROGRESS  
ONE YEAR ON FROM THE  
STATEMENT OF INTENT



Universities UK

Diversity and Diversity  
in Higher Education



# HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR'S COVENANT

In May 2019, the 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*. 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*, 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 <i>Understanding degree algorithms</i> (UUK & GuildHE, 2017).
<b>November 2018</b>	Published <i>Degree classification: transparent, consistent and fair academic standards</i> (UKSCQA, 2018b).
<b>November 2018 – February 2019</b>	Consulted on sector-wide actions to <u>protect degree standards</u> .
<b>May 2019</b>	Published <i>Degree classification: transparency, reliability and fairness – a statement of intent</i> (UKSCQA, 2019).
<b>October 2019</b>	Published sector-recognised degree classifications descriptors as an annexe to <i>UK Quality Code</i> (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 <u>principles for effective degree algorithm design</u> .  Published report on <u>degree algorithm practice for 2020</u> .
<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.

## 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), 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.

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