

# DEGREE CLASSIFICATION IN 2019-20



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## Key points

- In the face of the global pandemic, universities made rapid changes to move to online teaching, learning and assessment, enabling 492,355 students to complete their studies and graduate (HESA, 2021d).
- Across the UK, there was a six-percentage point increase of upper awards (first-class and 2:1 awards) in 2019–20. The proportion of first-class awards rose to over a third (35%) (HESA, 2021a).
- In unprecedented circumstances, universities ensured that the changing situation and digital poverty did not unfairly disadvantage students by introducing emergency regulations and policies including no detriment and safety net policies and expanding online student support.
- Many universities reported increased engagement of students with online teaching, learning and assessment and innovative approaches to course design and delivery.
- Universities are committed to protecting the value of degrees and put in place strong quality and standards mechanisms through robust academic governance processes.
- Analysis shows that despite the disruption, 2019–20 saw a narrowing of attainment gaps for the graduating cohort by deprivation, gender, disability and ethnicity.
- As part of the higher education sector’s covenant to protect quality and standards, universities will be analysing their results to better understand the drivers of degree classification changes in 2019–20, including through future revisions of degree outcomes statements in England and Wales.
- Universities are also considering what lessons can be learnt on the benefits of digital teaching and learning, new approaches to assessment, and online student support services.

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic created significant disruption across all educational settings in the 2019–20 academic year. The higher education sector was no exception. It successfully shifted to digital delivery in spring 2020, but this brought with it significant changes to teaching, learning and assessment.

Data released in January 2021 showed that across the UK, there had been an increase of upper awards in 2019–20. This follows what had been considered, in 2018–19, to be evidence of a levelling off in degree classification trends. Considerable work – led by Universities UK (UUK), GuildHE, and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) – had been undertaken to address concerns of grade inflation, with the sector strengthening the ways in which it upholds academic standards and protects the value of higher education qualifications. The increase in 2019–20 raises inevitable questions about the impact of the pandemic on degree classification.

This briefing reflects on the observed increase and sets out the measures institutions took to ensure quality and standards were not compromised, while also exploring the factors which may have impacted student attainment and what we can learn from this.

## Background

UK higher education has been experiencing a steady increase in the proportion of upper degree awards over the past 25 years. Between 1994–95 and 2017–18, the proportion of upper awards rose from 47% to 76%, and this figure remained at 76% in 2018–19 (HESA, 2021a).

This trend has been, in part, due to the hard work of students and continued efforts of providers to improve their offer. This includes improvements to student feedback, technological innovations, investment in facilities, increased training for academic staff, and enhanced and expanded student support services. These have supported students to

maximise their potential to do well. Improvements in students' prior attainment and greater preparation at school are also having an effect.<sup>1</sup>

However, questions have been raised as to how providers have been assuring themselves that improvements in teaching and learning and changes in student behaviours are the primary drivers of this trend. 'Unexplained' increases in degree awards have been identified in analysis by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (2018b) and for providers in England by the Office for Students (OfS) (2020a).

The sector has responded with a [UK-wide statement of intent](#) (UKSCQA, 2019), which set out firm commitments to strengthen transparency, fairness and reliability in degree classification by:

- ensuring assessments continue to stretch and challenge students
- reviewing and explaining clearly how final degree classifications are calculated
- supporting and strengthening the external examiners system
- reviewing and publishing data and analysis on students' degree outcomes

A [review of activity](#) published in December 2020 showed that considerable progress has already been made against these commitments. At a UK level, this has included the introduction of degree classification descriptors (QAA, 2019) and establishment of principles for effective degree algorithm design to guide reviews of practice (UUK and GuildHE, 2020a).

Further activities have also taken place within the distinct regulatory and quality assurance processes of the four UK nations. New processes have also been introduced where it was not possible to rely on the existing quality and standards architecture. In England and Wales, 105 providers have now published degree outcomes statements following comprehensive reviews of their degree classification profile and the identification of potential risk factors that require action.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the factors influencing degree classification, please refer to UKSCQA (2018a).

<sup>2</sup> This number is correct as of April 2021

The sector, however, has recognised the need for continued progress on this issue. This includes making further commitments 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
- encourage providers in England and Wales to revisit their degree outcomes statements a year after publication
- explore opportunities for enhancing providers' internal quality assurance processes
- build on the external examiner work of Advance HE, considering further ways of strengthening externality
- engage with governments to work with league table compilers to assess the use and presentation of a 'good degrees' metric

This briefing paper takes forward the first of these commitments. It summarises what happened in 2019–20, discusses what might need to happen next, and reflects on what this could mean for degree classifications in the future.

## What happened in 2019–20?

In unprecedented circumstances, the higher education sector responded to the Covid-19 pandemic with considerable flexibility, creativity and pace to minimise the negative impact on students. Following public health guidance, by mid-March 2020, providers had moved provision – including teaching, learning and assessment – online wherever possible to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff and students. This was extended into the wider institutional apparatus of universities, including changes to academic regulations and policies, student support services, and communication channels. Combined, these temporary efforts ensured students could continue to meet their learning outcomes and graduate or progress with qualifications that hold their value, while also minimising any unfair disadvantage associated with the pandemic.

Higher education has not been alone in this experience. Throughout the whole education sector, providers have acknowledged that students were and are learning under exceptional

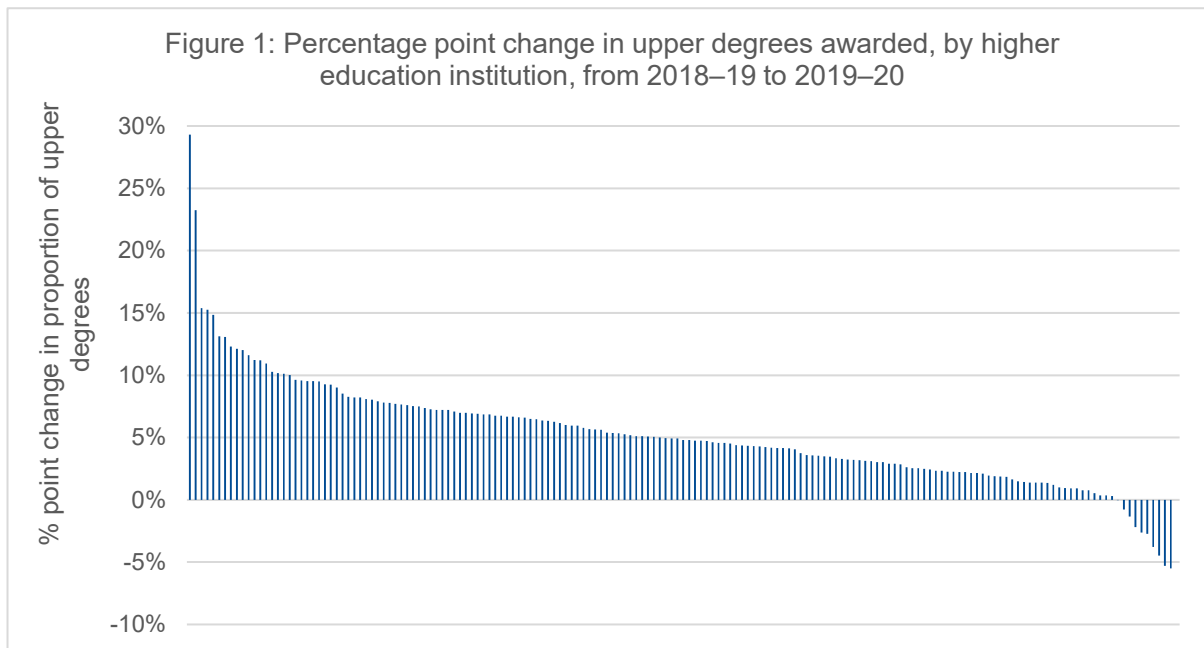
circumstances and that adjustments to existing arrangements may be required. For example, within schools, qualification results at Level 2 and Level 3 have been based on teacher judgements as opposed to standard assessments. In places, this coincided with a notable increase in higher grades. The English, Welsh and Northern Irish summer 2020 GCSE results saw the proportion of grades 7, 8 and 9 increase by 5.4 percentage points (pp) against the 2019 academic year (JCQ, 2020, p.8). Similarly, for A Level results, the proportion of students achieving three As or above rose by 11.9pp in 2020 against the previous year (Ofqual, 2020, p.14).

Data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2021a) for the 2019–20 academic year shows that across the sector as a whole and within each UK nation, there was a considerable increase in upper degree awards. Combined, there had been a six-percentage point increase in upper awards, rising from 76% in 2018–19 to 82% in 2019–20. Within this, the proportion of first awards rose at an even higher rate, with over a third of students now graduating with a first-class degree (35%).

However, there were clear differences between higher education and schools. Universities had less of their academic year left to complete when lockdown began; could change the format of assessments rather than cancel them, ensuring marks were based on actual performance; and retain their normal quality assurance processes, such as external examining. This helped to uphold quality and standards. Therefore, the picture is likely to be much more complex in higher education with the potential for positive lessons to be learnt.

## Provider-level data

Out of 168 higher education providers, 94% experienced an increase in their proportion of upper awards between 2018–19 and 2019–20 (Figure 1). The average change was 5.2pp against the previous year, with 11% of providers seeing an increase of more than 10pp. For the proportion of firsts, there was an average increase across providers by 6pp. As in the overall totals, increases in first awards were more pronounced, with 17% of providers seeing an increase of more than 10pp compared to 2018–19.



The image above shows the percentage point change in upper degrees awarded, by higher education institution, from 2018–19 to 2019–20. 94% of providers saw an increase in their proportion of upper awards, and the graph shows this increase falls between 1 to 10pp for the majority of providers, with four providers seeing an increase above 15pp. The graph shows 6% of providers saw a decrease in the proportion of upper awards, ranging from -0.1 to -5.5pp.

*Source: HESA (2018–19 to 2019–20) Student Qualifiers FPE. Providers with under 500 qualifying students in 2018–19 or 2019–20 were removed. This left a total of 168 individual institutions.*

## Subject-level data

The pandemic affected subject areas differently in terms of the planned nature of course delivery; Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements; and/or the conduct of assessments. Programmes that would typically have more in-person requirements (such as lab or studio time) or that rely on invigilated exams would have experienced different adjustments than programmes with more desk-based independent study and coursework components. A comparison between individuals achieving upper awards in science subject areas (81%) and non-science subject areas (82%) initially reveals a relatively consistent picture overall (HESA, 2021b). When focusing on first-class awards the difference is more pronounced, with firsts awarded to 38.9% of students studying science subjects



compared to 31.8% for non-science subjects (HESA, 2021b). However, this is in line with what has been seen historically.

Changes to how subjects are categorised has made time-series comparisons more difficult.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, some high-level, although caveated, assumptions can be explored.<sup>4</sup> Between 2018–19 and 2019–20, non-science subject areas increased their upper awards by 5.4pp, while science subjects rose by 4.9pp. Similarly, for first-class awards, non-science subjects increased at a marginally higher rate, at 6.6pp compared to 6.2pp for science subjects. However, overall, the increase in upper degrees does not appear to have been led by any particular subject discipline – although within individual institutions, there may be pockets of more significant changes and institutions will be analysing their data over the coming months to understand this. We recommend providers in England and Wales explore subject-level trends within future revisions of their degree outcomes statements.

## Attainment gaps are narrowing

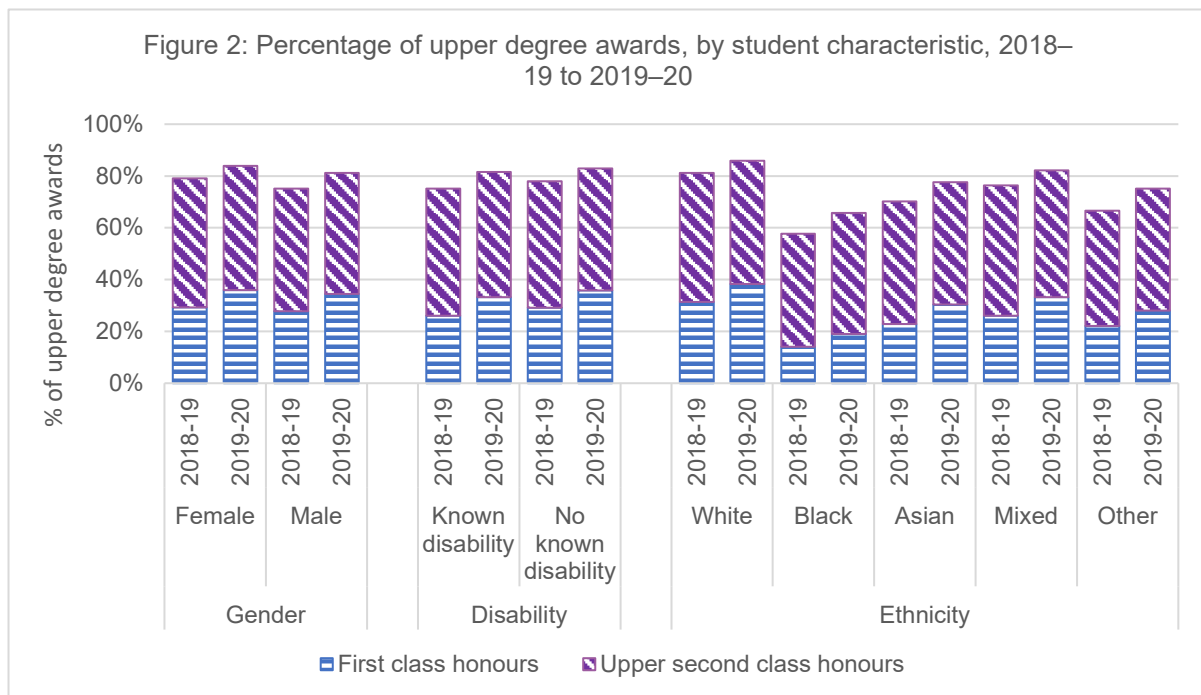
Reducing attainment gaps has been a priority across the sector. While there have been legitimate concerns about digital access and digital poverty, and the additional disruption on people's lives during the pandemic, the data suggests that there may also have been some positive experiences. Figure 2 shows the attainment gap across gender<sup>5</sup>, disability and ethnicity, with all displaying a noticeable closing of the gap over the past year. The precise reasons behind this trend are not yet clear. Further research and investigation should be taking place at a provider level, including modelling the *net* increase in upper degrees once changes in attainment gaps have been accounted for. We also recommend future research with staff and students to understand different students' experiences of the pandemic and how it impacted their engagement.

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<sup>3</sup> Although HESA introduced the Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) to aid in time series analysis they caution that the change in student distribution across the categories presents inconsistencies, and so advise against their suitability for publication. For further information about these changes please see here: [www.hesa.ac.uk/news/27-01-2021/sb258-higher-education-student-statistics/notes](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/27-01-2021/sb258-higher-education-student-statistics/notes)

<sup>4</sup> The methodology included comparing individual student qualifiers with the CAH Level 1 filter in the 2019–20 academic year with the SET JAC filter in the 2018–19 academic year.

<sup>5</sup> The 'Other' gender category was removed as the qualifying student total in 2019–20 was less than 500.



The image above shows the percentage of upper degree awards, by student characteristic, in 2018–19 and 2019–20. Across all characteristics within gender, disability and ethnicity, the percentage of both first-class honours and upper second-class honours rose between 2018–19 and 2019–20. More detail about the information in the graph is outlined below.

*Source HESA (2018–19 to 2019–20) Student Qualifiers FPE. Students from all UK nations and all modes of study were included, reflecting 353,585 students in 2018–19 and 344,425 in the 2019–20 academic year.*

- **The female to male gap in achieving upper awards reduced from 4pp in 2018–19 to 2.7pp in 2019–20.** The proportion of first-class awards increased at roughly the same rate for both genders with the proportion of 2:1 awards rising more for males (6pp) compared to females (4.7pp).
- **The gap in upper awards between students with a disability and those without reduced from 2.8pp in 2018–19 to 1.4pp in 2019–20.** Students in all

disability categories<sup>6</sup> increased their proportion of upper awards at a higher rate than students without a declared disability. For example, students who are 'blind or with a serious visual impairment' increased their proportion of upper awards by as much as 11.9pp. This trend is consistent when isolating for first awards alone.

- **The attainment gap between white and Black students has reduced from 23.5pp in 2018–19 to 20.1pp in 2019–20.** While the gap remains large, the trend appears to be moving in a positive direction with Black students increasing their upper awards by 8pp compared to 4.7pp for white students. The attainment gap between white and Asian students shows a similar picture which reduced from 11pp in 2018–19 to 8pp in 2019–20.
- In England, the gap in upper awards between the least deprived students (Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintile 5) and the most deprived (IMD quintile 1) has reduced from 17.7pp in 2018–19 to 15.2pp in 2019–20 (OfS, 2021).<sup>7</sup> The attainment gap has also reduced between students from the highest participation local areas, POLAR4 quintile 5 and the lowest quintile 1 from 9.6pp in 2018–19 to 8.7pp in 2019–20 for students in England (OfS, 2021).

## Policies and Regulations

In the 2019–20 academic year many providers introduced policies to mitigate the exceptional challenge the pandemic created for students. For providers in England, this was something that the OfS (2020b) recognised providers might consider in guidance on quality and standards. A range of terms have been used to describe these policies.

As autonomous institutions, providers will have introduced policies appropriate to their individual contexts. They may have judged that existing policies had sufficient flexibility to support students, for example, through the design of degree algorithms or progression rules.

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<sup>6</sup> The nine HESA disability categories can be found here: [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c20051/a/disable](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c20051/a/disable)

<sup>7</sup> This data is taken from the OfS (2021) Access and participation data dashboard. It includes all full-time undergraduates in providers who are registered with the OfS.

In other circumstances, additional or temporary measures may have been deemed necessary. The actions of providers should, therefore, be viewed as a package of measures. Typically, however, these can be viewed within three overarching approaches:

- **‘No detriment’** policies protect a student’s prior achievement and calculate degree awards and progression decisions based on the adverse circumstance not occurring.
- **Mitigating circumstances** policies are existing processes that many providers have amended to account for the pandemic’s impact.
- **Safety nets** refer to a range of newly introduced measures designed to support students, which may also include adjustments to teaching, learning and assessments.

### **Why were these policies introduced?**

Providers acted to ensure circumstances outside of the student’s control did not unfairly disadvantage them, recognising that the pandemic affected students in complex and multiple ways depending on their circumstances. Students were adjusting to new and unexpected forms of assessment and changes to library and study space access while also coping with the wider anxiety and disruption to daily life.

The benefit to mental health also motivated many providers to make changes to their policies. Along with a decline in mental health among students (Mind, 2020), polling has revealed that studies and grades have been the highest cause of anxiety during the pandemic (Save the Student, 2020). Providers responded quickly to get to the heart of student concerns during a time of rapid change and challenge, helping to reassure students who otherwise faced significant uncertainty.

### **What was the impact of these policies?**

Isolating the impact of these policies on student achievement is not straightforward as they were introduced in parallel with significant changes to teaching, learning and assessment. The specifics of the policies – and even the names given to the approaches – were also applied differently across providers. However, institutional analysis over the coming year, including updated degree outcomes statements in England and Wales, will support providers to reflect on how policies impact on overall classification proportions. Providers should consider modelling the impact of their no detriment policies (compared to their standard regulations and degree algorithms) to assess its likely effect across subjects and student

groups. It is also likely that the policies themselves will have influenced student behaviour, whether that is through pushing them to achieve a higher classification or by having confidence that their award would not reduce, and so feeling more relaxed and able to perform better.

'No detriment' policies undoubtedly have the potential to produce higher classification results for some students. This is because the policy typically protects a student's current level of achievement, where in previous years this may have fallen if subsequent marks were lower than the student's current average. 'No detriment' policies do not prevent a student from raising their grade through improved performance either. However, by March 2020, many students had already engaged in a significant amount of planned teaching and assessment through continuous and modular assessment. The composition of degree classification algorithms varies across providers but many use credits from earlier levels, and it is rare to be reliant on one set of final exams (UUK and GuildHE, 2020a). In short, where a larger pool of undertaken assessment was drawn from, the 'no detriment' policy was unlikely to change the overall classification. Students had to have been working at the level of a first before the pandemic for this to be awarded. Learning outcomes would also still need to be met and assessments passed.

Mitigating circumstance and safety net policies have enabled increased flexibility to support students to best demonstrate their achievement. It is expected these measures will have contributed to an increase in assessment submissions and progression rates. The QAA (2020a) have summarised the impact of these changes, including:

- Adopting more blanket rules within mitigating circumstances applications to best respond to the volume of similar requests. For example, in recognition that evidence from doctors may be more difficult to collect, many providers allowed students to self-certify illnesses. Where appropriate, some providers expanded this to cover circumstances unrelated to Covid-19.
- Introducing assessment extensions and/or flexible submission policies. Where introduced, if assessments were submitted late, they could still be awarded the full range of marks rather than be capped. Some providers have also introduced additional reassessment opportunities, without capping the marks.

- Introducing more flexible progression arrangements, for example, having discretion to look on a case-by-case basis at a student's prior achievement where assessment was not completed. This includes allowing more modules to be condonable – where passing a module is not required for progression throughout the programme – apart from where learning outcomes are linked to PSRB requirements not met elsewhere in the course, and allowing students to trail modules, to be completed later in their study.

### **How were quality and standards maintained?**

All providers are required to meet the expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. The QAA (2020b) has detailed steps taken by providers to ensure that standards were not compromised. For example, providers have continued to consult with external examiners at the subject level, working closely with them where changes were made and sharing best practice across the sector. PSRBs have been closely involved in ensuring learners can meet requirements for professional accreditation. This includes stipulating modules that are exempt from 'no detriment' policies and must be passed to progress. Internal governance procedures have then provided oversight and assurance on the ways in which standards have been maintained. More generally, we must underline that 'no detriment' policies draw upon existing achievement that students have demonstrated through assessment. A student will not have received a classification award where they have not evidenced an ability to work at that level.

### **Innovation in digital teaching, learning and assessment**

In March 2020, the sector pivoted to online delivery at pace. Despite the disruption from what had been planned, there are numerous examples of teaching, learning and assessment that engaged students in high quality digital education. Providers invested heavily, with an estimated additional spend of between £1m and £3m per provider on digital learning and teaching during 2020 (Jisc, 2020a, p.10). This investment and the adjustments to educational delivery presented innovative opportunities for pedagogical change that may otherwise not have been possible. Initial feedback from across the sector suggests that for many learners these changes may have supported improved outcomes.

## Teaching and learning

The most notable change to teaching and learning has been the mode through which it is delivered. Previously, the dominant delivery approach was in-person synchronous learning, where learners participate with the material in real-time. However, digital asynchronous learning, where learners can participate at different times, has been more widespread during the pandemic. Academic staff have invested considerable time and effort to make the changes to teaching a success.

This shift brings benefits, allowing students to revisit sessions, go at their own pace, schedule study more conveniently around other responsibilities and expand their access to online resources, with class participation sustained over longer periods. Feedback suggests that this has been particularly important for commuter students, students in employment or with caring responsibilities, or with certain disabilities that may make travelling to campus and working within strict timetables more difficult. The nature of asynchronous learning also encourages students to develop their independent learning and research skills.

Where previously lectures may have been delivered continuously for an hour or longer, now sessions are frequently separated into bitesize 10–30-minute content digests. Content is provided through pre-recorded videos, animations, written text, and slideshows, enabling learners to access information that matches their preferred learning style. Students have also been able to engage with the material and activities on a virtual learning environment (VLE) in tandem, enabling them to check their understanding before moving onto further content. Software such as *Padlet* or *micro* can be used to produce virtual sticky notes on content and once created these resources retain a digital legacy for use in the future.

Alongside accessing digital resources before lectures, students can still interact synchronously. Jisc's (2020c) work shows that where digital synchronous learning takes place it can be highly interactive, focusing on testing understanding rather than content delivery. Using chat functions during sessions makes lectures more interactive and has allowed for real-time responses to questions. The QAA (2021) identified more students engaging in online discussions who might otherwise be less comfortable participating. For example, students who may be less confident speaking publicly can now formulate and type a question. Sir Michael Barber's (2021, p.112) report on digital teaching and learning also

points to developed confidence among students, particularly about sharing feedback and chairing discussions.

Throughout the pandemic, existing student support services have also adapted to meet the needs of students. This includes personal tutor sessions, office hours by digital appointment, study skills services or library staff working to ensure students have access to the resources they need. Providers have reported increased attendance and accessibility to workshops on academic skills, previously often restricted to in-person delivery.

Notwithstanding pressures, many teaching staff have and continue to benefit from elements of the digital transition. Despite the shift occurring under atypical circumstances, staff attitudes indicate they enjoyed and were comfortable using the technology (Jisc, 2020b, p.7). The QAA (2021) have highlighted that throughout 2020 – as confidence increased – there was a shift towards more immersive and interactive approaches to teaching and learning. This has been supported by a collaborative culture within academic disciplines. Opportunities for snap evaluations and the use of voting technology have also enabled teaching staff to receive real-time feedback from students to support learning.

## **Assessment**

The public health restrictions required providers and academic communities to rethink how they use assessment, both in terms of its form and volume. Providers prioritised learners achieving their course level outcomes if modular outcomes were not possible. In many disciplines, the long-term use of summative invigilated assessment was replaced with more formative models. Generally, this brought on a shift to more coursework-based assessments along with the use of quizzes, video submissions and digital portfolios. Crucially, these assessment changes have been made through internal quality assurance processes and with PSRBs, so students and employers can be confident that the learning outcomes have been met.

Coursework-based assessment has long been associated with higher levels of achievement compared to examinations (Bridges *et al*, 2002; Richardson, 2015). Yorke (2002) for example attributed the upward trend in upper degrees in the mid to late 1990s to the diversification of assessment models. The high volume of coursework-based assessment throughout the 2019–20 academic year likely contributed to an uplift in student outcomes.



Changes to assessment may have longer-term benefits. Specifically, the take-home, open-book exam format had the benefit of focusing on comprehension instead of memorisation, and more closely resembles tasks in the professional world (QAA, 2021).

The learning and achievement of students is closely linked to feedback they receive on assessments. The digital domain has supported improvements, for example, automated marking of pre-designed assessments issue instant feedback to students, freeing the time of teaching staff to provide more personalised support. Polling finds improvements on previous years is due to 'staff putting time into commenting on work' and 'staff better able to provide wider feedback on general progress' (HEPI and Advance HE, 2020, p.41).

## Student engagement and behaviour

The restrictive nature of social distancing and 'stay at home' messaging has changed how students engage with their studies. In many respects, the conditions could be considered detrimental to student learning. However, for some learners, the circumstances have been favourable to an increased focus on independent study and revision.

An unintended consequence of the pandemic has been some students having additional time to focus on their studies. Many students normally work alongside their studies, but the economic impact and social distancing requirements reduced these opportunities with many facing redundancy or furlough. Furthermore, students' social activities were halted along with restrictions on travel. An early study from Spain suggests student confinement led to behavioural change related to study, finding improved performance in 2019–20 when comparing the same online assessment items delivered in previous years (Gonzalez *et al*, 2020).

Evidence from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Advance HE (2020, p.40) show improvements during the pandemic in areas such as independent study. Similarly, Advance HE (2020, p.15) found increased engagement related to 'staff-student partnerships', while 'interacting with staff' increased. In particular, the research noted higher levels of engagement among Black, Asian and minority ethnic students compared to their white counterparts during the Covid-19 pandemic. Jisc's (2020c) [Learning and teaching reimagined](#) challenges the direct relationship between engagement and contact hours.

Instead, they suggest adopting a more expansive definition including activities delivered from a VLE and within student communities.

However, the pandemic's impact has not been equally felt across the student body. While many learners have engaged with the adjustments, others were hindered by digital poverty, a lack of suitable study space and caring responsibilities (Jisc, 2020a). Providers have assisted in mitigating this through hardship funding and supporting access to technology. Where introduced by providers, the aforementioned no detriment and safety net policies protected students against these difficulties.

It is also true that the changing learning environment and use of technology may have enabled better engagement than in a standard year for some learners. This is particularly true for those students who benefited from the more flexible asynchronous approach to study, such as for students studying part-time, based off-campus or where technology removed accessibility barriers. Going forward, the sector needs to understand these trends and capture good practice to sustain engagement where it increased.

## What is expected for 2020–21?

While the wider context has shifted throughout 2020–21, with various restrictions in place across the UK nations, the impact on universities has been considerable and consistent. However, there are significant differences compared to the previous year. Universities now have a thorough understanding of the support students require, enabling them to adopt more targeted approaches. It remains the responsibility of individual institutions to decide their package of measures that best reflect their circumstances. Several differences, at a sector level, can be pointed to going forward. However, it must also be recognised that the disruption to life more broadly for current and prospective students means the impact of the pandemic will be felt far beyond the lockdown lifting.

In the 2020–21 academic year, providers were aware of the possibility of further lockdowns which would have the potential to disrupt in-person teaching and learning. Plans were put in place covering a range of scenarios to ensure that learning outcomes would be achievable irrespective of delivery method. Significant amounts of content were scheduled to be available online to minimise disruption to study. Responding to the specialist needs of

disciplines, some students were also able to engage in blended learning during parts of the 2020–21 year. Compared to the pivot made in March 2020, the sector was more prepared in 2020–21.

The local and national lockdown measures announced throughout 2020–21 prevented many students returning to campus and restarting in-person elements of their programme. Fewer assessments will have been undertaken when compared to the first lockdown announced in 2019–20. This may reduce the opportunities for ‘no detriment’ policies which tend to draw on existing evidence of achievement. While some programmes have been able to alter assessment processes, for others such as practice-oriented provision, the ability to meet learning outcomes has continued to be a challenge through 2020–21.

For continuing students, the adverse impact of confinement on mental health and wellbeing has been prolonged, covering more of the academic year than in 2019–20. Providers will need to remain mindful of the challenges students are facing, including those who have issues accessing technology or appropriate study space, those balancing childcare responsibilities, or those who have been bereaved or unwell due to Covid-19. Therefore, it is likely in some circumstances that adjustments for students will still be necessary to ensure they are not unfairly disadvantaged.

Since March 2020, the sector has trailblazed innovative and creative approaches to teaching and learning. For delivery in 2020–21, there was more time for teaching content to be refined and good practice shared across the sector. As teaching staff have grown in confidence and digital capability, there remains an appetite among students for technology enhanced learning to continue in some form (Barber, 2021, p.31). The future of in-person teaching, learning and assessment after the pandemic will vary by subject area and provider, and will shape degree classification results moving forward.

## What happens next?

The disruption of the pandemic has required institutions to do many things differently. In the teaching and learning environment, they have been driven by a goal to maintain the value of degree awards by putting in place strong quality and standards assurances and supporting progression and graduation. Alongside this, they have focused on ensuring the

pandemic would not unfairly disadvantage students. This has included providing mental health support, hardship funding, and a package of policy changes. Individual providers and the sector will continue to take forward this agenda, learning the lessons from the 2019–20 academic year and enshrining high standards across future delivery in all its forms. The following steps will be taken:

All providers will be reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on degree classification outcomes in 2019–20. We recommend providers in England and Wales use their future degree outcomes statements to do so. This will provide a greater understanding at a provider-level of how changes brought in by institutions affect student outcomes, whether this is in their academic regulations, across teaching, learning and assessment, or wider support services.

Providers across the UK have been asked to review and update their degree classification algorithms in line with UKSCQA [principles](#) published in July 2020. UUK is working with QAA through a series of workshops to support sector engagement and will continue to monitor progress. Lessons from the pandemic will be crucial for providers in thinking through how a degree should be classified.

As the public health restrictions reduce for universities, the return to campus will be an opportunity to explore which lessons from 2019–20 will continue and where online and/or blended approaches can be enhanced. This may include exploring curriculum design and supporting staff to develop more digital and blended teaching, learning and assessment opportunities. Sector bodies such as Jisc, Advance HE and QAA continue to share best practice across the sector. If done well, further improvements in student performance may be expected in degree classification outcomes. There should be a particular focus on how new approaches can support further progress on narrowing attainment gaps.

At the subject level, the sector will be horizon-scanning for future trends in professions and disciplines. Alongside this shift, applications to new forms of provision are likely to increase, building on the opportunities blended approaches bring to lifelong and flexible learning. This presents creative opportunities for providers to work with PSRBs to understand the interrelationship between academic and professional standards, and how these can be upheld with learning outcomes

assessed appropriately. Students have negotiated a range of digital platforms, gaining both communication and technical aptitude, enhancing their skills as employers adopt new ways of working.

The pandemic's impact has been felt across the entire education sector. For learners looking to progress to higher education, the sector will work closely with schools and further education colleges to support the transition. Returning and new students will also need continued support to access digital teaching and learning opportunities whether that is through technology or steps to improve digital literacy and skills.

The 2019–20 academic year has been exceptional in many respects and this has led to a complex range of interacting factors impacting on degree classification, in addition to the existing drivers identified in previous analysis. The increase in upper awards demands serious reflection across the sector and within individual providers. Although 'no detriment' policies will have contributed to this increase, the changes to teaching, learning and assessment speak to a wider shift taking place. The sector has had a parallel focus to mitigate the pandemic's disruption on students and transform education delivery digitally. This means that students can have confidence that their qualification holds value and reflects their academic achievement.

It is now incumbent on the sector to take forward the new opportunities created during the pandemic's upheaval and further our understanding of the diverse factors that drive degree classification results. While it is anticipated that the impact of the pandemic will continue to be felt within future student cohorts, the sector will need to continue the progress made to date after the pandemic. It is not yet clear what lost learning at school and disruption to and rescheduling of teaching and assessment within higher education will mean for results. However, progress to ensure degree classification remains transparent, fair and reliable, and the value of qualifications is protected, will continue.

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