

# UWE Bristol Degree Outcomes Statement

July 2023

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# Degree Outcomes Statement: UWE Bristol

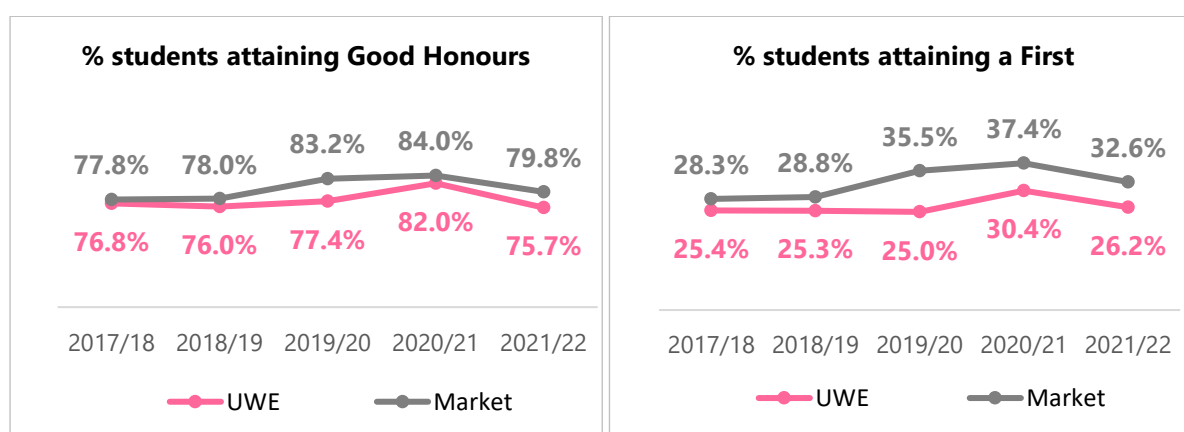
## 1. Introduction

This Degree Outcomes Statement sets out how UWE Bristol protects the value of our awards and ensures that our academic standards align to UK sector benchmarks. It demonstrates that:

- UWE Bristol takes a proactive, evidence-based approach to the management and oversight of our academic standards and the degrees we award.
- The proportion of UWE Bristol students achieving a first or upper second-class honours degree has been below the sector average over the past five years and is now lower than in any of the preceding four years.
- The University's method of calculating degree classifications has been in place since 2001, and the frameworks, policies and procedures that govern our academic standards are stable, reliable, consistent and align to relevant benchmarks.
- Our strategic focus on enhancing pedagogic practice and the learning environment, combined with our sector-leading approach to student mental health and wellbeing enables students to thrive, and this is reflected in our degree classification profile.
- The Board of Governors can have confidence that the arrangements in place to protect the value of the University's awards and ensure academic standards align to UK benchmarks are appropriate and are functioning effectively within a culture of continuous improvement.

## 2. Institutional degree classification profile<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1: Good honours and first-class degree attainment 2017/18-2021/22 (UWE vs sector)

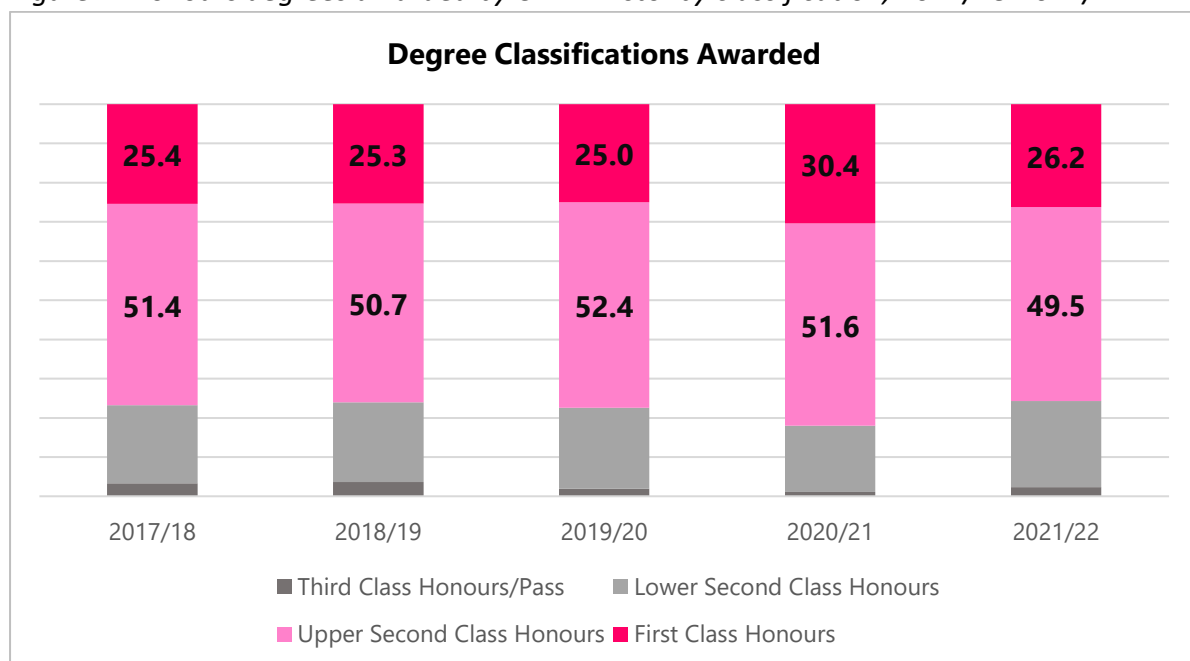


<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of the data contained in this report, using internally generated data and without market comparisons, was published in December 2022 in fulfilment of a Universities UK request to the sector to provide evidence that action was being taken to return to pre-pandemic levels of first and upper-second class degrees awarded by 2023.

The proportion of UWE Bristol students achieving a first or an upper second-class honours degree, often referred to as “good honours”, has remained below the market average over the last five years. It is now lower than any of the preceding four years (Figure 1) and slightly below pre-pandemic (i.e. 2018/19) levels.

Our most recent first-degree award data, for 2021/22, show 75.7% of students achieving an upper second or above against a market average of 79.8%. The proportion achieving first class honours is also lower, at 26.2% against 32.6% for the market as a whole. As Figure 2 shows, the increase in good honours in recent years was driven largely by an increase in first class honours. This was likely related to the impact of changes to the academic regulations adopted under *force majeure* in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, some of which were integrated on an ongoing basis from 2021/22 onwards.

Figure 2: Honours degrees awarded by UWE Bristol by classification, 2017/18-2021/22



Demographic analysis of data on upper second/ first class honours attainment amongst UWE graduates over the same five-year period highlights:

- There is little variation in award outcome in relation to age group.
- Female students continue to be more likely to achieve a good honours degree than male students. The differential increased again in 2021/22 – by 2.6 % points to 3.8% points – compared to 2020/21 but remains lower than that of the market as a whole (4.7% points).
- The slight gap in good honours awarded in relation to disability identified in the last two years persists, which is out of line with sector performance. However, the UWE gap did not increase for 2021/22, and the proportion of students known to have a disability achieving good honours reduced at a lower rate than for students without/ not known to have a disability (3% points cf 7% points).
- In line with the sector, there continues to be an award gap between black and minority ethnic students and white students, which increased again in 2021/22 having narrowed

in 2020/21. This was largely due to a greater rate of reduction in good honours attainment amongst black and minority ethnic students than for white students (-7% cf -4.3%).

The data underline the institutional importance of wider work in progress, via the Access and Participation Plan and Strategy 2030, to eliminate all attainment gaps by 2030.

There are variations but no clear trends in the proportion of students achieving good honours year-on-year between subject areas. 16/54 subjects<sup>2</sup> saw increases in good honours above the market rate in both 2020/21 and 2021/22. Such data can be more volatile for smaller cohorts but is being monitored.

The remainder of this document summarises the mechanisms and evidence through which the Board of Governors, our students and stakeholders can be assured that our approach to the classification of degree awards is reliable and consistent.

### 3. Academic governance

Academic Board is responsible for the governance of our academic activity and is accountable to the Board of Governors for the effectiveness of its approach. The University's [Academic Assurance Framework](#) sets out how Academic Board works to scrutinise academic activity and ensure that academic standards are maintained. Data considered through the annual committee cycle include the distribution of degree classifications at institutional, faculty and programme level and in the context of market data over time, as well as evidence of the good functioning of the regulatory framework, and associated policies, procedures and processes. Analyses are presented to the Board of Governors in the Annual Report on Quality and Standards in February each year.

Our [Enhancement Framework for Academic Programmes and Practice](#) drives a holistic approach to the design, development, approval and review of our provision and of our teaching, learning and assessment practice. It is aligned to the expectations and core practices of the [UK Quality Code](#) and is designed to ensure compliance with the Office for Students' Ongoing Conditions of Registration in relation to quality and standards ("[the B conditions](#)"). The procedures through which it is operationalised ensure that the academic standards of all programmes align to the [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#) and to the relevant [Subject Benchmark Statements](#). The effectiveness of the Enhancement Framework is overseen by the Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Committee (LTSEC) on behalf of Academic Board.

The University makes appropriate use of [external expertise](#) to assure the comparability of our academic standards with those of other UK universities. External advisors contribute to

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<sup>2</sup> Defined using level 3 of the Common Aggregation Hierarchy of the Higher Education Classification of Subjects system adopted across the UK sector for classification of academic subjects from 2019/20 onwards.

programme design, approval, and revalidation activities. Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies provide external scrutiny of the robustness of our processes and standards for accredited programmes. External examiners provide assurance that our assessment and marking practices are in line with sector benchmarks and are consistent across successive cohorts of students. External examiner feedback is scrutinised in detail by Faculty Academic Standards and Quality Committees and the University Quality and Standards Sub-Committee, with any issues of concern escalated to LTSEC and addressed by Academic Board within the Annual Report on Academic Quality and Standards. Recommendations are fed into the University's [continuous improvement](#) processes and any cross-University actions are driven forward through LTSEC.

## 4. Assessment and marking practices

Our [Assessment and Feedback Policy and supporting policies and guidance](#) set out how we ensure an efficient, effective, fair and transparent end-to-end assessment experience for students and establish the conditions for students to achieve degree outcomes that reflect their full academic potential. Effective operationalisation of these policies and procedures is overseen by LTSEC and is confirmed to the Board of Governors through the Annual Report on Academic Quality and Standards.

Cross-institutional understanding of assessment and marking practices is achieved through our suite of professional development programme for academic staff, which is accredited by Advance HE against the [UK Professional Standards Framework \(UKPSF\) for Teaching and Supporting Learning in HE](#). This learning is developed further in those with leadership roles through our [Programme and Module Leadership Development Programme](#). Our network of Partnership Leads and Link Tutors ensure that staff engaged in the delivery of UWE Bristol's provision through our UK and international partners undertake equivalent professional development. This is evidenced within annual monitoring reports and confirmed through periodic Partnership Agreement Reviews.

## 5. Classification algorithms

We operate a single, University-wide degree classification algorithm for all undergraduate honours degree programmes, which has been in use consistently since 2001/02. The current formula does not take into account foundational learning at FHEQ level 4 (the first year of an undergraduate programme), but rather draws on a student's 100 best credits at each of FHEQ levels 5 and 6 and is weighted in favour of achievements at level 6 (the final year of study). This approach means that the final degree classification represents a student's overall achievement but also reflects the development of their knowledge, understanding and skills over the programme.

Following a review in response to the publication of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment's [New guiding principles for effective algorithm design](#), the University will

include all 120 credits at level 6 in the classification calculation. This retains the principle of recognising students' academic development, whilst ensuring closer alignment with wider sector practice. The new algorithm applies to new undergraduate students joining the University from September 2022/23 onwards only and so will impact outcomes for the first time at the end of the 2024/25 academic year.

Award Boards can raise an individual student's final classification into the next band only in very [limited circumstances](#). Variation to the algorithm formula is permitted only where required by an accrediting body, for example to specify that a particular module outcome must contribute to the overall calculation. All variations require Academic Board approval and are published to students within programme specifications.

Information to help students understand how their degree classification is calculated is provided within the [student-facing](#) section of our internet. This includes an indicative degree outcome [calculator](#).

## 6. Enhancement activity and good practice

Major initiatives designed to improve student academic attainment over the past five years include:

- Effective use of performance data to inform continuous improvement of programmes and identify good practice for wider dissemination.
- Implementation of the Enhancement Framework, underpinned by investment in developing staff expertise in curriculum design and delivery.
- Significant investment in digital education tools, including event capture, improvements to the Virtual Learning Environment and a major expansion of electronic library resources.
- Enhanced student induction and ongoing development of academic literacies, as well as increased access to peer assisted learning (PAL) support and to opportunities for volunteering, study abroad, work-based and work-related learning.
- Our sector-leading, whole-University approach to student mental health, encompassing investment both in specialist services and in embedding student mental wellbeing and the development of resilience in curriculum design and across the wider learning community. Our mature Fitness to Study approach, in particular, enables early identification of at-risk students in order to work meaningfully with them to manage personal challenges so that they can progress and complete their programme successfully.

## 7. Progress against actions set out in previous Degree Outcomes Statements

The University has made good progress on delivery of actions set out in previous Degree Outcomes Statements:

- New Academic Regulations were approved in July 2022 and are being phased in over 2022/23 and 2023/24. The final version was informed by an external review of the underlying principles to ensure continued alignment to sector norms.
- Work to establish a Digital Education Service is underway as part of wider work to shape the University's digital learning approach through development of a new Target Operating Model.
- The Subject Readiness Review Project initiated a comprehensive strategic review of the taught portfolio against the University's strategic ambitions, drawing on subject cluster self-reflections, market insight data, critical review of alignment to Strategy 2030 themes and the outcomes of diverse subject and thematic deep dives. The project will inform future investment priorities and enable a risk-based approach to portfolio development and review.
- The Transforming Assessment project facilitated a year-long, university-wide conversation about the future of assessment at UWE in 2021/22. Key themes explored included programmatic assessment, use of pass/fail assessments, learning outcome definition, introduction of marking bands, the place of digital assessment, and feedback practices.
- The Bridging the Awarding Gap project is providing a focus for action to address all awarding gaps, of which the White/Black awarding gap has been identified as an area of particular concern.
- Learner Analytics capability was an important factor in the identifying students in need for additional support during the pandemic. Following a pilot in 2021/22, the University is now implementing a cross-institutional coaching approach to the provision of personalised advice and guidance to students through a team of specialist Success Coaches, who will build upon this approach to ensure all students are connected to the right support, encouragement and challenge to achieve their best performance.

## 8. Action plan

Key actions planned or in progress to ensure that our awards continue to align with sector reference points, whilst simultaneously enabling all our students to achieve their full potential, include:

- Full implementation of new Academic Regulations from 2023/24.
- Local delivery of Advance HE's external examiner training across all subject areas.
- The Transforming Assessment project will take forward three major workstreams during 2022/23 exploring i) programmatic assessment, ii) making feedback effective through a



culture of partnership, and iii) making the most of educational technology. This latter workstream includes piloting a digital assessment platform.

- A review of the postgraduate taught algorithm is in progress, with any changes to take effect for new students from 2024/25 at the earliest.
- The impact of the new academic regulations on overall student performance and the performance of different demographic groups is being monitored closely. The first cohort of undergraduate students to receive degree-level awards on the basis of the new degree algorithm will graduate in 2024/25.
- A review of examining boards is exploring opportunities to create more space for enhancement-focussed discussions.
- Newly established School Boards of Study will strengthen detailed scrutiny of programme performance and drive enhancement activity. The new committees will report to LTSEC and will be fully operational from 2023/24.

The Board of Governors has oversight of this work through regular reports on Strategy 2030 and the Annual Report on Academic Quality and Standards.

## 9. Risks, challenges and mitigations/ Areas for further review

- Impact of the new academic regulations on student and staff behaviour: as with all changes there is potential for unintended consequences, although modelling to date suggests most change will occur within, rather than between grade boundaries. This will remain subject to close monitoring.
- Addressing attainment gaps: work to increase attainment for specific groups of students has the potential to create an inflationary impact overall, although action on the attainment gap is being taken sector-wide and, in any case, the ethical justification for action must outweigh any concerns about increases in the rate of “good honours” awarded.
- Ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student academic and social wellbeing: the impact of disruption to learning within the school system arising from the pandemic will continue to be felt over the next several years, both in terms of subject knowledge on entry and incoming cohorts’ general readiness for university life. We will work closely with the student body to understand their needs and co-create solutions, including through the development of a [Student Futures Manifesto](#).
- Regulatory intervention: OfS’s analysis of degree classifications (most recently published May 2022, next iteration due Summer 2023) does not take into account local factors, such as action to improve learning and teaching practice or address differential performance between different demographic groups or subject areas. We will continue to analyse OfS data in light of local factors to determine whether any growth in good honours remains unexplained and take further action, depending on findings.