

# UWE Bristol Degree Outcomes Statement

2 July 2020

# Degree Outcomes Statement: UWE Bristol

## 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<sup>i</sup>. 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 in line with, or just below, the sector average over the past five years and the annual rate of increase in that figure has slowed;
- 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 teaching 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.

## Institutional degree classification profile

The proportion of UWE Bristol students achieving a first or an upper second class honours degree (often referred to as "good honours") has increased over the last ten years, although our rate of growth has slowed compared to the UK market as a whole over that period (Figure 1). In the most recent five years, the proportion of good honours and first class awards has been in line with, or slightly lower than, the sector average. Our most recent undergraduate degree award data, for 2018/19, shows 76.1% of students achieving an upper second class award or above and 25.3% achieving a first class degree, against market averages of 78.0% and 28.8% respectively.

Figure 1: Good honours and first class degree attainment 2009/10-2018/19 (UWE vs UK sector)

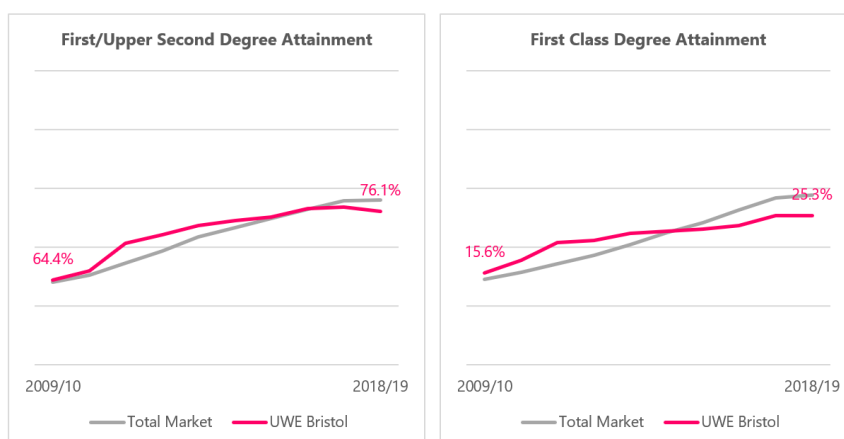
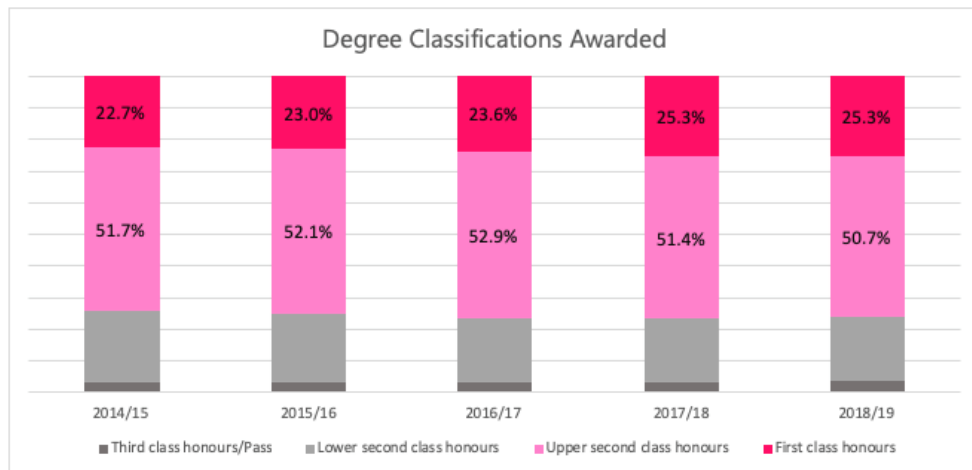


Figure 2 below illustrates further the slower growth in the proportion of students achieving first class and upper second class degrees over the last five years: the percentage of students achieving an upper second has decreased for the last two years, and there was no change in the proportion achieving a first between 2017/18 and 2018/19.

Figure 2: Honours degrees awarded by UWE Bristol by classification, 2014/15-2018/19.



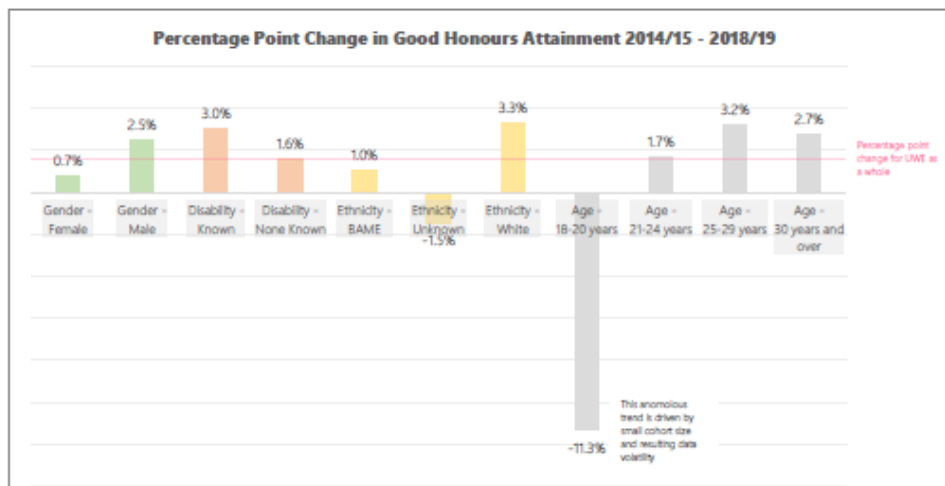
There are small variations, but no trends in the proportion of students achieving good honours year-on-year between subject areas. Such data can also be more volatile for smaller cohorts.

Figure 3 below summarises the percentage point change in good honours awards by demographic group over the same five-year period. Analysis of these data highlights:

- No difference in award outcome in relation to age group;
- Female students are slightly more likely to get a good honours degree than male students, although the differential is falling;
- There is now no difference in good honours awarded in relation to disability;
- In line with the sector, there continues to be an award gap between BAME and white students; and while good honours degree attainment has increased for both categories, the rate of increase has been slower for BAME students.

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<sup>ii</sup>.

Figure 3: Percentage point change in good honours degrees awarded by UWE Bristol by demographic group, 2014/15-2018/19.



Office for Students (OfS) analysis suggests that the upward trend in the proportion of UWE Bristol graduates achieving a first or upper second class degree between 2010/11 and 2017/18 cannot be explained by the characteristics of graduating cohorts alone and that other factors must be at play<sup>iii</sup>. Over that period:

- Our method for calculating degree classifications has not changed, nor have our Academic Regulations changed materially;
- We have enhanced the ways in which we work with our students to help them to manage challenges in their personal lives alongside their studies, and to access the kinds of wider developmental activities that help to drive academic success;
- We have also made significant investments in learning and teaching practice, and in the wider student experience, underpinned by targeted, data-led enhancement activity at subject and programme level. The positive impact of this is underlined by marked increases in both student satisfaction and graduate outcomes over the same period.

The Board of Governors has maintained oversight of this work, with detailed scrutiny of performance data via the Strategic Planning and Performance Committee (SPPC).

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.

### 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 Academic Assurance Report in November each year<sup>iv</sup>.

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](#). 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 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 by the Partnership Quality Sub-Committee for partnership provision), with any issues for University-wide consideration reviewed by LTSEC and addressed by Academic Board within the Annual Academic

Assurance Report. Recommendations are fed into the University's [continuous improvement](#) processes and any cross-University actions are driven forward through LTSEC.

### 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 set 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 Academic Assurance Report.

Cross-institutional understanding of assessment and marking practices is achieved through our suite of professional development programme for academic staff. The baseline [Academic Professional Programme](#) aligns to the national [Academic Professional Apprenticeship \(APA\) Standard](#) and 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.

### 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. It is set out within our [Academic Regulations](#), which have been in place with only minor modifications since 1998/99<sup>v</sup>. The 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. 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, are reported annually to the Board of Governors within the Annual Academic Assurance Report 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](#). In December 2019, Academic Board approved a revised regulatory framework to facilitate the delivery of innovative, inclusive, practice-led learning, teaching and assessment in support of Strategy 2030. The degree algorithm itself will not change. The new regulations will be in place in full from Academic Year 2022/23.

### 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, alongside investment to develop 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.

### 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:

- Implementation of Practice-led Grading Descriptors during 2020/21 aligned to Strategy 2030;
- Full implementation of new Academic Regulations from 2022/23;
- Roll-out of the Advance HE external examiner training programme across all subject areas from 2020/21;
- Continued detailed work to address identified attainment gaps through our Access and Participation Plan;
- Adoption of Learner Analytics capability through which to identify and provide personalised advice and guidance to students whose engagement with their studies is of concern;
- A major redesign of our operating model to enable a personalised approach to the delivery of student-facing services.

The Board of Governors will have oversight of this work through regular reports on Strategy 2030 and the Annual Academic Assurance Report.

### 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 be 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.

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<sup>i</sup> The ability to demonstrate this forms part of the OfS ongoing conditions of registration for which the Board of Governors is responsible. The relevant requirements are Condition B4 “The provider must ensure that qualifications awarded to students hold their value at the point of qualification and over time, in line with sector recognised standards”; and Condition B5 “The provider must deliver courses that meet the academic standards as they are described in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications at Level 4 or higher”.

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<sup>ii</sup> Due to limitations in the data fields available, the analysis presented to our Board of Governors does not include a breakdown by POLAR quintiles, however this is focused on in our Access and Participation Plan (APP). OfS data provided for APP shows that we do not have significant attainment differences across POLAR quintiles, but we do see variance across IMD (Indices of Multiple Deprivation) quintiles. Our APP consequently includes a target to reduce the attainment gap for students from underrepresented groups.

<sup>iii</sup> Office for Students (2019) [\*Analysis of degree classifications over time. Changes in graduate attainment from 2010-11 to 2017-18.\*](#)

<sup>iv</sup> The 2019/20 report will also provide assurances in relation to emergency action in response to major disruption to the University business arising from the 2020 CoViD-19 pandemic.

<sup>v</sup> [Alternative regulations](#) were introduced temporarily in April 2020 in response to the CoViD-19 pandemic but did not alter the degree algorithm.