Degree Outcomes Statement, 2021

The University of Leicester is committed to ensuring that the value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.

The University's academic governance structure, led by Senate acts strategically to protect the value of qualifications over time. Senate monitors the effectiveness of the University's strategies implemented to achieve this aim.

This statement has been produced by the University's Quality and Standards Sub-Committee and covers five academic years up to 2019/20. The statement includes analysis of the University's assessment and marking processes, an outline of the academic governance structure, a summary of quality assurance practices, and an outline of awarding regulations and the institutional degree classification profile.

1.   Assessment and Marking Practices

Assessment practices are scrutinised through the programme development and approval process. Programme teams are required to reference relevant benchmarks to ensure that assessment criteria meet relevant sector reference points. Approval Panels include relevant external academic expertise to confirm academic standards and assessment approaches. External Examiners are appointed for every programme and confirm each year the appropriateness of the University's assessment, marking and moderation practices. External experts are recruited according to sector informed criteria. The University has recently revised its Degree Classification Descriptors in line with the UKSCQA descriptors[1]. The University has continuously increased its level of staff with recognised teaching qualifications. As of September 2021, 79.5% of teaching staff had achieved a teaching qualification.

There is a single consistent University wide Policy and Procedure for the management of mitigating circumstances and similarly for considering academic appeals, informed by the OIA good practice framework.

The University framework for marking and moderation practice is set out in Senate Regulations. The University operates a two tier process with a Panel of Examiners considering module level outcomes and a Board of Examiners determining overall student outcomes via the application of the progression and classification algorithms, see below. The Panel of Examiners is responsible for reviewing outcomes at module level and confirming that appropriate marking and moderation practices have been applied. These are subsequently confirmed by the External Examiners for the programme both at the Board of Examiners and through the annual reporting process. The University receives assurances on the operation of these processes via regular summary reports considered through the Education Committee and Senate.

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[1] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/annex-d-outcome-classification-descriptions-for-fheq-level-6-and-fqheis-level-10-degrees.pdf?sfvrsn=824c981_10

2. Academic Governance

Senate has ultimate responsibility for the setting and maintenance of academic standards. In the 2019/20 academic year this responsibility was delegated to the Education Committee. Senate is informed of developments through a report to each of its meetings. In addition, it considers regular reports on each of the key quality assurance procedures. The operation of the academic governance framework is set out in a University level Code of Practice on Academic Governance which is owned and approved by Senate.

The University operates standard quality assurance processes across the lifecycle of its programmes to ensure that they remain current and offer an excellent learning experience to our students. This includes programme development, approval and modification, annual review and a robust system of external examining to ensure that programmes are scrutinised and benchmarked against relevant sector standards such as the UK Quality Code, FHEQ and relevant PSRB requirements.

Each core quality assurance processes is governed by a Code of Practice which is approved by Senate. The monitoring of the assurance activities is undertaken by the Quality and Standards Sub-Committee which reports to the Education Committee. This range of processes, which include external input at relevant points contribute to the University's confidence in the academic standards of its award and their value over time.

Processes for the management of collaborative provision are set out in the Code of Practice for the Management of Higher Education with Others, and in the most recent QAA Higher Education Review (2016), were found to meet requirements and the associated risk level was confirmed as low. Robust processes are in place for the risk assessment, business case and academic approval of new partnerships. All aspects of course design, teaching, assessment and the student experience are scrutinised through the relevant approval processes. All standard processes for the monitoring of programmes are applied to collaborative provision, and these are supplemented by additional components, which focus on the particular complexity of partnership arrangements and are managed by the Global Partnerships Management Group of the Education Committee.

In 2020 the University, like many others in the sector, introduced a No Detriment Policy referred to as the Safety Net. The intention of the Policy was to ensure that the onset of the global pandemic and its effects on the lives our students did not negatively impact student outcomes. The Policy was developed using appropriate reference points and data to model the potential impact. The Policy was consulted upon with both staff and student representatives. A review of the impact of the Safety Net was undertaken over the course of the 2020/21 academic year, was considered by the Education Committee and is summarised below.

3. Classification Algorithms

The University's undergraduate degree classification algorithm is set out in Senate Regulation 5. In 2019/20 finalists were considered under the 2017/18 degree classification algorithm. This was reviewed in 2017 a revised algorithm introduced for 2018/19 entrants.

Students may be awarded a classification either on the basis of their credit weighted average or by a combination of their average and preponderance of credits. Students falling into a defined borderline category are reviewed by the Board of Examiners and a decision made on whether to promote to a higher classification according to set criteria. These align to level 6 programme

intended learning outcomes, such as independent analysis and research, which reflect the requirements of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and the Characteristics Statement for Bachelor's Degrees.

One capped re-sit attempt is allowed for any failed module as standard. One further re-sit opportunity may be offered at the discretion of the Board of Examiners. The 2017/18 regulations, under which the 2020 graduating cohort were considered, allowed for a student achieving a mark of between 35-39% at module level to be awarded a compensatory pass, subject to the achievement of a sufficient credit weighted average for the level.

Degree classification regulations are set out to students in Senate Regulations, student handbooks and in the Digital Learning Environment. Students have access to University advice via their Schools and independent advice from the Advice Service in the Students' Union. Both staff and students were involved in the design of the Safety Net Policy, which was supported by extensive communication and a suite of supporting resources online for students.

3.1   Impact of Covid-19

In 2019/20 the onset of the global pandemic saw the introduction of the University's Safety Net Policy. The policy had two components – protection for a student's credit weighted average achieved prior to the pandemic and revisions to the preponderance rules. Some programmes were exempt from the Safety Net on the basis of professional requirements.

A benchmark credit weighted average was calculated for each student on the basis of the marks achieved for the modules completed in the first semester of 2019/20. Where a student's overall credit weighted average for the year following all assessments fell below this benchmark, students were awarded their benchmark CWA for the year. In order to access their benchmark students were required to have attempted and passed all assessments in the second semester. This used existing student achievement as a robust basis for benchmarking, and ensured that students accessing their benchmark had still met all intended learning outcomes associated with the modules studied during the pandemic.

Although the Safety Net policy would protect their overall CWA students may still be disadvantaged if their performance in individual modules was impacted by the pandemic. To address this the University slightly reduced the number of credits that a student required under the preponderance rules in order to qualify for a higher classification. Overall awarding thresholds were maintained. All external examiners for taught programmes were informed of the policy and all following the award process all confirmed the maintenance of academic standards and overall appropriateness of the University's awards and classifications.

3.2   Looking forwards

The University introduced a new classification algorithm for students starting their studies in the 2018/19 academic year. In reviewing the algorithm the University took account of a range of benchmarks, feedback from external examiners and from other internal stakeholders. The new algorithm was designed to further drive up academic standards for award and classification, and recognise the particular role that the final year of study plays in terms of meeting level 6 learning outcomes. The revisions ensured that borderline regulations and rules around compensation would not contribute to grade inflation or compromise the overall academic standards of University of

Leicester awards. This new algorithm was also benchmarked against the Principles for Degree
Algorithm when they were released by the UKSCQA in July 2020[2]. This benchmarking exercise
confirmed that the University's 2018/19 algorithm met recognised sector best practice in all areas.

4.   Institutional Degree Classification Profile

The overall rate of Good Honours at the University was relatively stable until 2019 and then
increased in 2020.

Figure 1: UoL % Good Honours over time
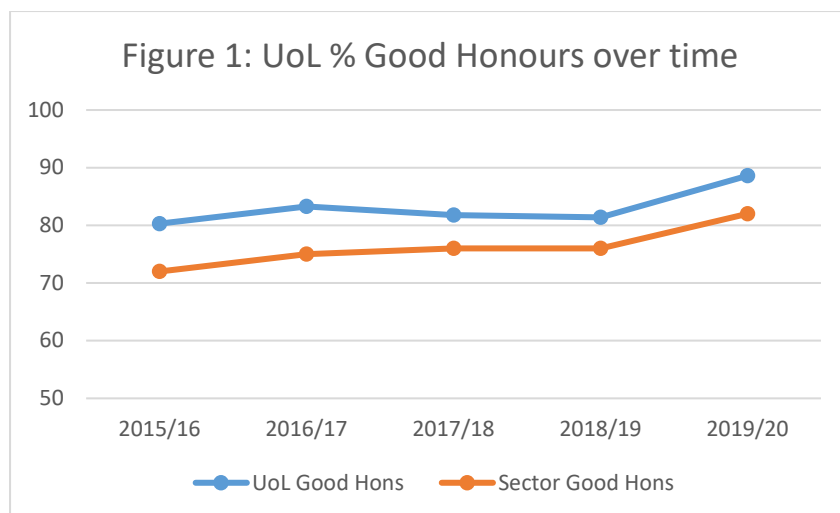
Source: HESA (Heidi database)

This growth in 2020 was in line with the sector, where the proportion of good honours awarded
across the sector saw a significant increase in 2020. The following box and whisker plot sets out the
general trend of increases in good honours awards within the sector and where the University of
Leicester sits within this.

FIGURE 2: Grade Inflation - Mainstream HEIs
UK-domiciled, full-time, first degree qualifers with a classified degree
(Source: HESA HEIDI System)
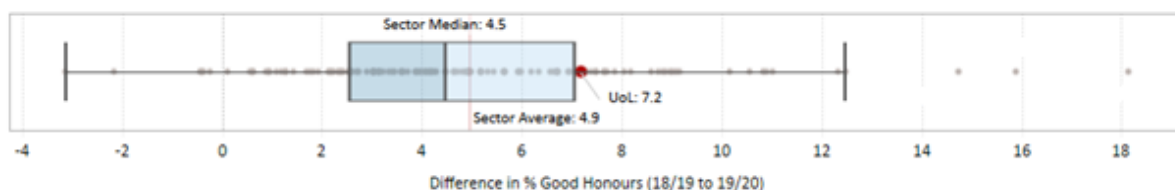
In November 2020 the Office for Students (OfS) published an analysis of degree classifications over
time covering the period 2010-11 to 2018/19[3]. The OfS reported that the 'unexplained' difference,
between expected and actual awards, within the sector in 2018/19 for first class degrees was 14.3
percentage points. The University of Leicester had a difference of 14.4 percentage points. The
'unexplained' difference at Good Honours level for Leicester was 16.5, which is 2.8 percentage
points higher than the sector average of 13.7.

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[2] https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/principles-effective-degree-algorithm-design.pdf
[3] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/55b365fd-2d77-46c0-a8ad-45304047a0be/analysis-of-degree-outcomes-over-time-2020.pdf

For 2018/19, the University ranked 74th (down from 68th the previous year) of 147 providers on the percentage of 1st class degrees given. The University ranked 46th (down from 40th in the previous year) for the overall percentage of students awarded good honours.

A report published by UUK and Guild HE analysing degree classifications in 2019/20[4] indicates that although there was an increase in the highest awards in 2020 it was not appropriate to draw a direct causal link from the application of No Detriment or Safety Net policies:

- Across the UK, there was a six-percentage point increase of good honours in 2019–20. The proportion of first-class awards rose to over a third (35%). 94% of providers experienced higher overall outcomes in 2019/20, and 11% saw an increase of more than 10% in their upper awards.

- It is very hard to isolate the impact of specific Safety Net or equivalent policies on the growth in good honours given the range of other changes to learning, teaching and assessment that took place in 2020. At sector level factors such as behavioural change and increased engagement of students with online learning and assessment may have had a role.

4.1   Closing the awarding gap

The University of Leicester is a selective institution with an embedded commitment to widening participation, diversity and equality. The University's Access and Participation Plan details the University's ambition and strategy to widen participation for the 2020/21 academic year. The University remains one of the most diverse universities in the UK with 52% of its students coming from a black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background. To contextualise this, within the ex-1994 Group and Russell Group institutions, Leicester has the ninth highest proportion of UK domiciled BAME students, and has the highest proportion outside London. [5]

The University has identified where gaps in access, continuation, attainment and progression have occurred over time and compared to the sector. The institution has many initiatives already in place to reduce the gap for under-represented groups in higher education set out in an approved and published Access and Participation Plan (APP). The Plan sets out the various actions and robust targets that the University has set to address the awarding gaps between different student groups.

The rate of Good Honours achieved by students of typically underrepresented groups is consistently higher at the University of Leicester than the sector average. In 2020 the rate of Good Honours achieved by BAME students at the University of Leicester was 8.4% higher than the sector average, and for Black students in particular it was 12.2% higher. In 2020 the awarding gap between BAME students compared with white students[6] at the University was 8.0%. This had reduced by 1.9% from 2019 and is considerably below the overall sector gap of 9.9%[7]. The University is proud of the

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[4] https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-08/degree-classification-2019-20.pdf

[5] University of Leicester Access and Participation Plan 2020-21. Available online: https://le.ac.uk/about/making-a-difference/equality/access-participation#:~:text=and%20Participation%20Plan%3F-,What%20is%20an%20Access%20and%20Participation%20Plan%3F,and%20progress%20from%20higher%20education.&text=Our%20current%20institutional%20Access%20and,%2F21%20-%202024%2F25.

[6] Defined as the difference between the percentage of white and BAME students getting a first or upper second class honours degree.

[7] https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/advance-he-launches-ethnicity-awarding-gaps-uk-higher-education-201920-report

evidence of a reduction in the awarding gap but recognises that there is significant further work to be done to eliminate the gap overall.

5.   Teaching Practices and Learning Resources

2020/21 saw the first cohort of students complete programmes that underwent Curriculum Transformation in 2017/18. Curriculum Transformation was a campus wide initiative which reviewed all taught undergraduate programmes to ensure they develop fundamental academic and transferrable skills, to diversify and make assessment methods more authentic and to support student's academic progression.

In 2021 the University is due to launch a new Research Inspired Education Strategy, a central pillar of which is to '*provide challenging programmes that enable students to achieve their full potential regardless of background*'. To support the implementation of the Education Strategy the University has introduced a new Education Services department. The Service supports Schools in the design, development, delivery, and continuous improvement of high-quality programmes which meet the needs and expectationsof our diverse student body.

As a first in the country, the University has recently established the Leicester Institute for Inclusivity in HE (LIIHE). The LIIHE will develop and incubate ideas, working in partnership with academic schools, Education Services and related services to pilot and evaluate initiatives and approaches before they move into mainstream practice at the University. The LIIHE will be at the heart of the University's commitment to addressing the current awarding gaps between different demographic groups.

6.   Actions

Following the implementation of the new classification algorithm and additional measures undertaken to support student outcomes in 2020/21, the University will review outcomes for this academic year with relation to the previous 5 years.

Given the exceptional nature of 2020/21 and its potential impact upon student outcomes, further data is required on the outcomes under new algorithm for additional cohorts before its overall impact can be evaluated. The University has provisionally scheduled a review of the degree classification algorithm for the 2022/23 academic year. The outcome of any review will be reported through the academic governance framework, including to Council as the University's ultimate governing body.

7.   Risks and Challenges

The action that the University took to protect student outcomes during the exceptional period of the pandemic was appropriate and effective. Outcomes in 2020 were slightly higher but this reflected the general sector position and, as noted by UUK, this cannot be attributed solely to amendments to classification algorithms. As the new University degree classification algorithm is implemented and the University further develops its model of blended learning delivery there is a risk that these factors may impact the overall degree classification profile in future years. This will be closely monitored by the Quality and Standards Sub-Committee and the Education Committee, with recommendations for action made as appropriate.