University of Birmingham Degree Outcomes Statement

The University of Birmingham was established by Royal Charter and granted degree awarding powers in 1900. The University has enjoyed a high-level of autonomy for over a century allowing us to challenge and develop great minds, push forward the boundaries of knowledge and make an impact on regional and global communities. The University is characterised by a tradition of innovative academic research and is recognised globally as an institution of outstanding education. Our degrees carry global currency, as reflected in one of the largest international student communities in the UK with students coming from more than 150 countries.

Section 1: Institutional degree classification profile

The proportion of Good Honours (1st and 2:1) degrees awarded by the University of Birmingham in the last five academic years is presented in Table 1. Each year, we monitor and critically review our degree outcomes data as part of our ongoing quality assurance work. At the same time, we make continuous enhancements to all aspects of our teaching and learning support to ensure students can achieve their potential. We are proud of our students' degree outcomes and we attribute these to each student's individual efforts supported by the university's collective and continuous endeavours to enhance their academic experience.

The proportion of Good Honours degrees we have awarded over the previous five academic years is broadly consistent. The proportion of Good Honours awarded in 2018/19 is comparable to the proportion awarded in 2014/15, and this provides assurance that our academic standards remain consistent. There is variation in Good Honours awards across subject areas and between different student groups, and this is subject to ongoing critical review by senior University committees (see section 3) and targeted actions.

It should be noted that in 2019-20, the Covid-19 pandemic presented unique challenges to the University and the sector as a whole. Face-to-face teaching and assessment were, at short notice, switched to wholly online provision while on-campus proctored examinations were cancelled. To address the challenges, the University introduced an Emergency Framework for Assessment and Progression and this included an institution-specific ‘no detriment’ policy designed to ensure students were not disadvantaged by the pandemic. The introduction of the emergency Framework for Assessment and Progression has resulted in an increase of 5 pts to 94.3% in Good Honours awarded, and an increase of 8.1pts to 41.1% of Firsts. Early evidence from across the sector suggests that there have been similar increases for many institutions. It is important to recognise that even under our ‘no detriment’ policy in 2019-20, all students were required to demonstrate sufficient evidence of achievement at the degree classification level they were finally awarded.

Table 1: Good Honours attainment over 5 year period (UK and EU students).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Good Honours</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2:1</th>
<th>2:2</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>Pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015/16</td>
<td>87.3%</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016/17</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017/18</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018/19</td>
<td>89.3%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019/20</td>
<td>94.3%</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 2: Assessment and marking guidance

Students’ marks, progression and awards are confirmed by Boards of Examiners, who have formal authority to do so on behalf of Senate. External Examiners are members of all Boards of Examiners.

A range of assessment-related legislation and guidance is available to support academic units with developing assessment, marking and moderation practices and the operation of Boards of Examiners. This includes the Code of Practice on Taught Programmes and Module Assessment and Feedback, Guidance on Assessment Tariff, and Guidance on Moderation, as well as professional development for staff who teach and support student learning provided by our Higher Education Futures institute (HEFi).

The External Examiner system is the primary external mechanism for assuring the quality and standards of our degrees. External Examiners from comparable institutions are appointed to act as examiner for subject areas where they have the required level of experience to offer an expert view on quality, standards and equivalence within the sector. External examiners review our approach to assessments (i.e. the suitability and standard of examination questions), including marking criteria, and then review samples of assessed student work to ensure the marks awarded meet sector standards. This calibration of standards provides assurance and informs the ongoing development of our modules, programmes and assessments.

All External Examiners complete an annual report on their findings. Their reports are scrutinised by senior academic staff and any themes and issues that arise are considered by relevant committees, including University Quality Assurance Committee and University Education Committee. Issues arising are addressed as part of the School Education Plans that each School is required to develop annually and are then reviewed by both University Quality Assurance Committee and University Education Committee. Actions are SMART to ensure they can be achieved and changes to practice made, where necessary, and evaluated.

As recommended by the QAA UK Quality Code and associated Advice and Guidance on Course Design and Development and External Expertise, the following are in place at the University of Birmingham:

- External experts are engaged to provide impartial and independent scrutiny on programme development and approval; in addition we have an extensive periodic comprehensive review process for all academic units (the Vice Chancellor’s Integrated Review);
- External reference points such as QAA subject benchmark statements, QAA Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications and PSRB requirements or guidelines are considered as part of the Programme Development and Approval process.

In addition to the above, the University of Birmingham is in the process of appointing External Advisors on Academic Standards for undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision. The External Advisors will contribute to the University’s regular review and analysis of student outcomes data, and associated policy and practice, providing an external perspective informed by significant senior experience of academic quality and standards within the HE sector. The External Advisor for Academic Standards for undergraduate provision will review the Degree Outcomes Statement annually as part of their main duties.
Section 3: Academic Governance

In accordance with the University Charter, Statutes and Ordinances, matters relating to education, academic quality and standards remain the responsibility of Senate. In common with other leading universities, Senate is supported in this task by a series of sub-committees that scrutinise new programme development activity, quality assurance processes and outcomes, collaborative provision, academic policy and legislation, academic standards, and degree classifications and outcomes, including reports from external examiners (see section 2). This process is overseen by the University Education Committee (UEC), which reports regularly to Senate on the business of each meeting, and a report on each Senate meeting is submitted to Council.

University Executive Board (UEB) considers and takes decisions on University strategy, operations and management relating to education and teaching. Academic members of UEB are also members of Senate and, where relevant, its sub-committees, providing an effective link between strategic and academic governance. UEB and Senate regularly consider reports on degree outcomes and student success. Each College has a College Board chaired by the Head of College/Pro-Vice-Chancellor, who is also a member of UEB. College Boards consider a variety of matters in the operation of the College, including those related to education, and they feed into UEB, Senate and its sub-committees.

A structure chart can be viewed here.

Section 4: Classification algorithms

The degree algorithm that is used at the University of Birmingham is described, in detail, in Regulation 7 (section 7.3). There is only one algorithm in use across the University to ensure consistency and fairness, with variations in calculations depending on whether the degree is a 3 year Bachelors programme, a year abroad programme, or an undergraduate Masters programme. A Bachelors programme will be used as an example; for details of the variations for 4 year programmes please see Regulation 7 (section 7.3) and the Code of Practice on Taught Programme and Module Assessment and Feedback (section 7.7). It should be noted that implementation of the Emergency Framework for Assessment and Progression in response to the Covid-19 pandemic required changes to the classification and progression algorithms for 2019/20 only.

A classified Bachelor’s degree with honours (360 credit programme) is normally awarded to students who pass at least 320 credits, to include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level/Stage/Year</th>
<th>Credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level C (Certificate) / Year 1</td>
<td>At least 100 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level I (Intermediate) / Year 2</td>
<td>At least 200 credits (with at least 100 credits at level H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level H (Honours) / Year 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A student is required to pass 100 credits in each year to progress to the next year. For any modules that are failed (the pass mark is 40%), students in year 1 or 2 are provided with one opportunity to retake the assessment or repeat the module. Students in year 3 cannot retake an assessment or repeat a module unless they have extenuating circumstances (for example, if they were unwell).
Year 3 modules contribute more towards final degree classification than the modules in year 2 (25% in year 2 and 75% in year 3 for most programmes of study). Although specific degree algorithms vary across the sector, there is often an emphasis on achievement in the final year(s) of study because this recognises that a student’s performance may improve over time. The zero weighting in year 1 allows for students to make the transition into university, although it is a requirement to pass at least 100 credits in order to progress to the year 2.

A student’s average mark will determine their degree classification, based on the criteria below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Average Mark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>70% or above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:1</td>
<td>60-69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:2</td>
<td>50-59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>40-49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process for the consideration of ‘borderline’ cases is described, in detail, in the Code of Practice on Taught Programme and Module Assessment and Feedback (section 7.7). There is only one process in use across the University. This is considered to be the fairest and most transparent way to process ‘borderline’ cases.

The average mark (described above) is always the first method used to calculate degree classifications. In the event that a student’s average mark falls in one of the pre-determined borderline areas then they can be considered for a higher award. The boundaries for consideration are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Boundaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>for consideration for a 1st</td>
<td>≥ 68.0 - &lt; 69.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for consideration for a 2:1</td>
<td>≥ 58.0 - &lt; 59.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for consideration for a 2:2</td>
<td>≥ 48.0 - &lt; 49.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for consideration for a 3rd</td>
<td>≥ 38.0 - &lt; 39.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Below are examples of how a student's final degree classification may be calculated if they fall into a borderline boundary:

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4 For 2020-21 only the zone of discretion for degree classification boundary will be extended as part of the Policy on Fair Assessment and Fair Outcomes designed to ensure the 2020-21 graduating cohort is not disadvantaged by the Covid-19 pandemic.
Section 5: Teaching practices and learning resources

Enhancements made to practice over recent years that have had a discernible effect on degree classifications include the following initiatives:

- Guidance for Boards of Examiners was amended in summer 2019 to extend their role in confirming that assessment and marking processes have been conducted appropriately, leading to a set of marks and awards that are agreed to be an accurate and appropriate reflection of student performance;
- At School level, data on the degree classifications awarded are reviewed alongside external examiners’ comments, with monitoring and accountability resting with Heads of School. Actions taken by individual Schools include; increased scrutiny of marks before Boards of Examiners consideration; introduction of shorter marking scales; introduction of more detailed grade descriptors; restructuring of exam papers; and work with external examiners to identify and drive actions.

A student has an average of 68.2% (a 2:1) so can be considered for a 1st.

Does the student have more credits with an average mark of 70% or above?
Remember, credit achieved in year 3 contributes more to the final degree.

Yes - the majority of the credits that the student has achieved are above 70%.

The student is awarded a 1st.

No - the majority of the credits that the student has achieved are below 70%.

The student is awarded a 2:1.

Does the student have more credits with an average mark of 70% or above?

Remember, credit achieved in year 3 contributes more to the final degree.

Yes - the majority of the credits that the student has achieved are above 70%.

The student is awarded a 1st.

No - the majority of the credits that the student has achieved are below 70%.

The student is awarded a 2:1.
Section 6: Identifying good practice and actions

Recent institution-level actions, and identified good practice, relating to degree classifications include:

- The introduction of Grade Point Average (GPA) certificates, to make more granular outcomes available, help address some employer concerns regarding the current classification system, and make the degree outcomes of our students clearer in an international context;
- Increases to the average weighted mean mark boundary required to be considered for a 1st or 2:1 degree for undergraduate students commencing their studies in 2017/18 and thereafter;
- In School Education Plans for 2019/20, all Schools were required to consider the proportion of good honours degrees awarded and develop additional actions as appropriate if they were out of line with comparable institutions in the sector. Actions planned for 2019/20 include; reviewing assessments with a high proportion of marks above 60%; sharing best practice on setting exam questions; additional and/or earlier review of draft assessments and exam questions; and a review of final-year grades and failure rates;
- As noted in section 3, University Executive Board monitors and reviews student performance data on an ongoing basis and evaluates the impact of local and central initiatives on degree outcomes;
- As noted in section 2, the External Advisor for Academic Standards for undergraduate provision will review the Degree Outcomes Statement annually as part of their main duties. The External Advisor for Academic Standards will, as part of their review, recommend any significant amendments as appropriate to the Degree Outcomes Statement for consideration by University Executive Board, Senate and Council.

Approved by Council: 22nd April 2021

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5 Please note the extended zone of discretion for each degree classification in 2020-21 only as part of the Policy on Fair Assessment and Fair Outcomes.