



DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

TRANSPARENT, CONSISTENT
AND FAIR ACADEMIC
STANDARDS –
CONSULTATION ANALYSIS



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INTRODUCTION

The [UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment \(UKSCQA\)](#) launched a consultation in November 2018 on proposals for higher education providers in the UK to develop and adopt a sector-wide statement of intent to protect the value of qualifications over time. The consultation was based on the findings and recommendations outlined in the report [Degree classification: transparent, consistent and fair academic standards](#), which highlighted sector-wide trends that have influenced the increased proportion of upper degree awards, and set out potential steps to help ensure the transparency, reliability, fairness and reasonable consistency of undergraduate degree classification.

The UKSCQA proposed that the long-term increase in upper awards requires a clear and demonstrable commitment from higher education institutions to protect the value of qualifications, as expected by the UK quality code. It suggested that a statement of intent would encourage and support institutions to undertake reviews of internal practices, processes and outcomes – taking actions where necessary – to ensure transparency, reliability, fairness, and reasonable consistency in academic standards.

The [consultation](#) was designed to gather views on the proposed statement, including its potential implementation in each of the UK nations, and where there was need for refinement and/or clarity. The consultation was led by Universities UK (UUK) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) on behalf of the UKSCQA and ran between 28 November 2018 and 8 February 2019.

The consultation responses highlighted:

- the need for collective and demonstrable action that builds on existing practice and commitment to protect the value of qualifications
- the diversity of institutions, including differences in governance structures and national quality assessment arrangements
- the importance of institutional assessment criteria and classification practices that account for academic discretion and disciplinary differences
- the value of externality and the need for this to be supported, including through professional development

These have informed a framework for action and demonstration of the strong and positive commitment from providers and sector bodies to review and strengthen practices to protect the value of qualifications.

CONSULTATION ENGAGEMENT

The consultation received 129 submissions via an online portal¹ and five written submissions by email. Most respondents (98) to the online portal were higher education providers. Responses were also received from three further education colleges, seven sector bodies, two student representative bodies, one students' union, and two Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs). 16 responses were submitted by individuals.

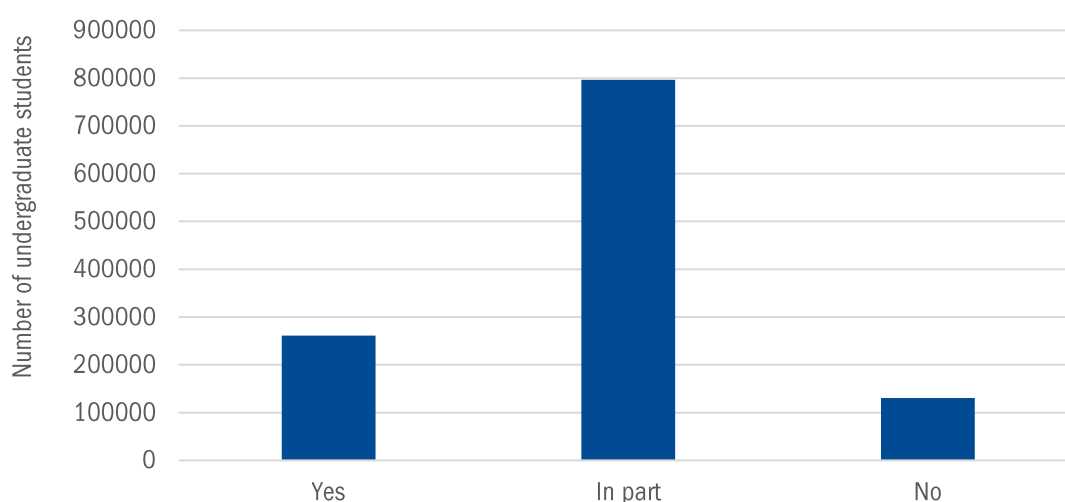
Among the 109 respondents providing identifying information, where their respective nation could be assigned, the most responses came from England (75). There were 13 UK-wide respondents, 12 were from Scotland, five from Wales, and four were from Northern Ireland.

To engage further at a national level, UUK and QAA jointly led five 'informing your response' workshops at the start of 2019, designed to help inform attendees with their organisation's formal consultation response. These were held in Glasgow (15 January), Cardiff (17 January), London (18 and 21 January), and Belfast (24 January), with 168 people attending.

INFORMING THE STATEMENT OF INTENT

Responses to the consultation were largely positive towards the proposed statement of intent: 87% of respondents supported the proposed statement, with clarifications, as an effective UK-wide framework for protecting the value of qualifications over time, at least partially if not wholly.² These responses covered approximately 1,060,000 undergraduate students in 2017–18.

Q1 'Does the adoption of a UK sector-wide statement of intent represent an effective approach to meeting the challenges outlined in the report?':
number of undergraduate students (2017-18) covered by
provider-respondents



UKSCQA Degree classification consultation online portal responses / Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2018) Student Record 2016–17

¹ Three submissions started by individual respondents did not provide valid data.

² To the question, 'Does the adoption of a UK sector-wide statement of intent represent an effective approach to meeting the challenges outlined in the report?' 67% of respondents answered 'in part' and 20% 'yes' (n=128)

The responses emphasised the importance of institutional autonomy, balanced by a desire to drive genuine collective action to protect the value of qualifications. The need for the statement to ensure students continue to be stretched and challenged by their studies, without losing sight of improvements and successes in student attainment, was also a common theme.

The consultation proposed five areas for the statement of intent:

- **institutional evidence**, including a degree outcomes statement
- **external assurance**, including an external adviser on academic standards
- **external examining**, including strengthening current practice
- **degree algorithms**, including publishing and explaining the design and rationale of algorithm practices
- **classification descriptions and calibration**, including shared sector classification descriptors and a shared sector metric

Respondents from each of the nations mostly agreed with areas proposed for internal institutional review of evidence and practice, namely:

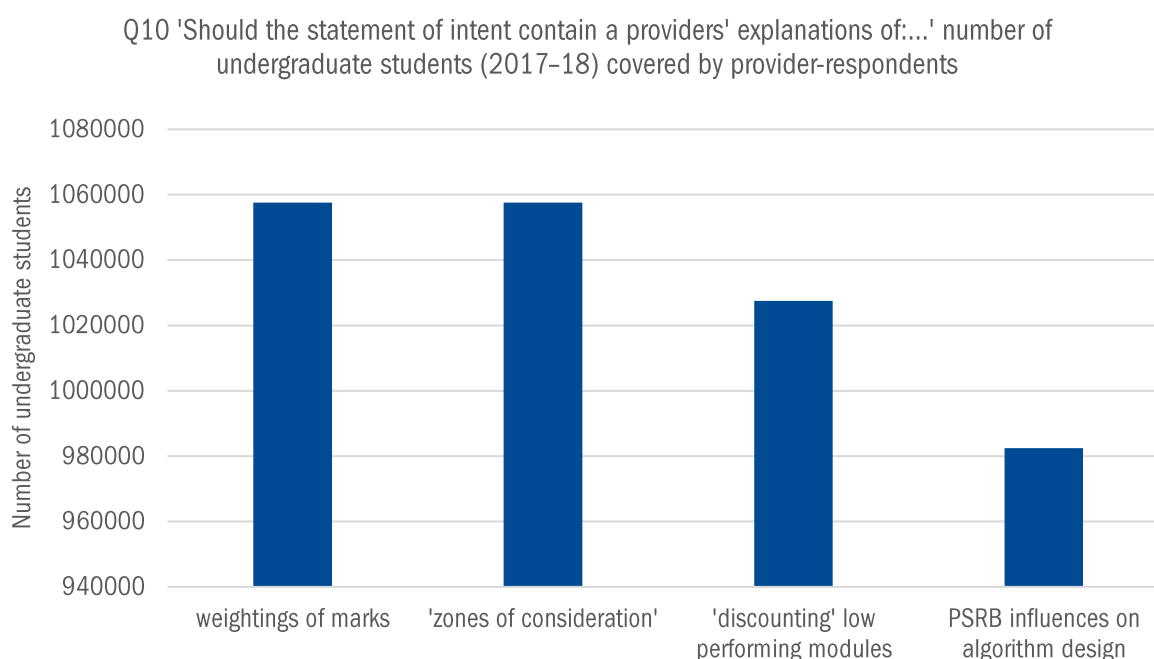
- institutional grade profiles
- academic governance
- classification algorithms
- marking practices
- equalities assessments

There was an acknowledgement that for different providers, the relevance and balance of these areas could vary. In England and Wales there was support for publishing the outcomes of a review in a 'degree outcomes statement' as part of an internal assurance process. In Scotland, a review of practice and evidence was considered valuable, but with many of the proposed components already covered by existing quality assessment arrangements. In Northern Ireland, respondents suggested work would be required to map against existing arrangements.

Appropriate externality at governance level when assuring academic standards was supported in principle, but the responses highlighted differences in governance arrangements and current or potential institutional approaches to external assurance. This included the role of existing external assessment process, such as Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) in Scotland, or potentially embedding externality into '*degree outcomes statements*'. 34% of respondents were in favour of the specific proposal of an

‘external advisor on academic standards’ to be employed by institutions to support a process of internal review, typically among English institutions.

There was broad support across the nations that institutions should review and explain the rationale for the design of their degree algorithm, particularly among institutional respondents. More than two-fifths of all respondents felt that providers should publish clear explanation of weighting (88%), ‘zones of consideration’ (88%), ‘discounting’ (89%), and PSRB influences (88%). In all nations, 70% or more of respondents agreed that institutions should explain the rationale for practices relating to the systematic discounting of core modules and zones of consideration at classification borderlines, where in operation. Their written responses included support for transparency, clarity of presentation, and common principles of acceptable practice, while allowing some flexibility of design, particularly between disciplines.



*UKSCQA Degree classification consultation online portal responses /
Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2018) Student Record 2016-17*

Respondents from all nations welcomed opportunities and commitments to support the external examiner system. The options explored by respondents included:

- reiterating and raising awareness of the external examiner system and the independence underpinning it
- building on the Advance HE training to support external examiner professional development
- supporting subject-based communities of practice to support external examiners and calibration activities

- consistency in the role and core responsibilities, including professional development and recognition via the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF)³

Institutions in England felt that there could be some benefits from working with HESA to develop data resources to support internal review and benchmarking of outcomes. However, care should be taken to ensure that any shared metric does not create a *de facto* norm referencing or performance target, or normative assumptions about student potential (for example, an overreliance on entry qualifications).

FUTURE OPTIONS

There was support from 83% of all respondents for opening discussions with league table providers about the appropriate use of degree outcomes in ranking algorithms. There were mixed views about developing an alternative classification system or changing classification boundaries, but interest in how information could be presented to students, including further development of the Higher Education Achievement Report.

NATIONAL LEVEL APPROACHES

The consultation highlighted that while there are common principles and commitments at a UK-level, the statement's implementation should be embedded in national quality arrangements. Responses from Scotland and Northern Ireland, in particular, signalled that much of the proposed statement of intent is already covered by national quality assessment arrangements. In addition, the need for demonstrable action to protect the value of qualifications over time was considered less of a priority that could risk undermining improvements in attainment within an enhancement-led approach.

The statement of intent therefore seeks to articulate a UK-wide commitment to be taken forward by institutions through national level activities where necessary. These will reflect the different quality and regulatory arrangements across the UK, and the varying nature of the issues and trends. These actions will map the statement of intent against existing quality assessment arrangements while identifying where additional actions may be necessary.

England

Given the profile of the issue and the shift to a risk based regulatory framework, the consultation and the research which informed it suggest the need for a commitment from providers to self-assess practices and publish a 'degree outcomes statement' during 2019–20. This review would help to inform internal assurances against the Office for Students' (OfS) ongoing conditions of registration B4 and B5 (value of qualifications).

Wales

Implementation should be mapped against the Quality Assessment Framework and the Quality Enhancement Review process, including the role of a degree outcomes statement in internal assurance of quality and risk. Further discussions with the sector in Wales suggest a collective interest in examining the role of qualifications frameworks and classification

³ The UKPSF is a nationally-recognised framework for benchmarking success within HE teaching and learning support, managed by Advance HE.

descriptions in course design and assessment to ensure students are stretched and challenged.

Scotland

The principles of the statement of intent are secured by the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) and elements, which form part of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review process. Feedback from the sector in Scotland suggests that further analysis of evidence on degree classification patterns as related to Scotland will be necessary to identify whether there is need for further consideration through the QEF and ELIR, and what this should entail.

Northern Ireland

The statement of intent can be mapped against Annual Performance Review process, including assurance statements from governing bodies and scrutiny of data.

DEGREE CLASSIFICATION DESCRIPTIONS

UKSCQA proposed a description of honours degree classifications as a shared reference point for institutional assessment criteria, and to support the development of external examiner practice. A draft classification description was developed by the QAA through sector-wide engagement across the UK nations, and was presented for formal consultation alongside the statement of intent.

Consideration of written responses to questions 11–15 suggest that for most respondents the classification document provides an appropriate reference point for degree classification, with a final round of refinement and sector engagement recommended. Additional work is now underway to address concerns raised during the consultation, to ensure address the following points:

- there should be clarity and consistency of key terms to ensure each classification is sufficiently distinct and clear
- the terminology should provide a shared reference point for practice that continues to stretch and challenge students
- autonomous degree awarding bodies should be expected to set their own assessment criteria, including variation between subjects, and should not rely on standardised sector marking criteria
- there are different national qualification frameworks, particularly in Scotland in respect of honours and ordinary degrees, that cannot be fully reflected in a single UK-wide description
- in England, the classification description should enable reliable assessment of standards at institutions registered with the OfS by the designated quality body, if considered necessary

The revised description will be appended to the Frameworks for Higher Education (FHEQs)⁴ as supplementary guidance. Decisions on its use or adaptation as part of formal quality assessment arrangements will be taken at national levels. In England, it is recommended that the revised description be considered for adoption as a sector recognised standard for the purposes of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

SUMMARY

The outcome of the consultation demonstrates strong support for the sector to make a statement that reiterates its commitment to protecting the value of its qualifications. *Degree classification: transparency, reliability and fairness - a statement of intent* represents an opportunity for institutions to review and calibrate their practice as appropriate, and publish outcomes. The statement provides a framework for this activity, including:

- reviewing assessment criteria and classification practice, including their transparency and consistency and whether they continue to stretch students
- supporting externality and challenge in the process of assuring academic standards, including at governance level and the external examiner system
- reviewing quantitative degree outcomes data to understand trends, demonstrate improvement and identify any potential risks
- publishing the outcomes of a review of practice through existing assurance arrangements

It will be down to providers, as autonomous degree awarding bodies, to reflect on their own arrangements and practices to ensure that they are protecting the value of qualifications in the context of a long-term and sector-wide increase in the proportion of upper awards. It is up to institutions to ensure that there is appropriate internal and external challenge or scrutiny of their own practices this process, including through national quality and regulatory arrangements as appropriate.

The UKSCQA will also undertake a review of the statement in approximately a year's time to examine its impact and whether there is merit in follow-up work to build on the themes outlined in the statement and issues of long-term sustainability.

⁴ The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS)

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This publication and accompanying research was conducted by Universities UK, GuildHE and the Quality Assurance Agency on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment. The UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment provides sector-led oversight of higher education quality assessment arrangements that continue to be shared across the UK. The committee has members drawn from regulated providers in England and Wales, publicly-funded universities and colleges in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and providers currently designated for student support by the Secretary of State in England. Student interests are represented by both the National Union of Students and individual student members. Membership is also drawn from the four UK higher education funding/ regulatory bodies, sector bodies and regulatory partners.

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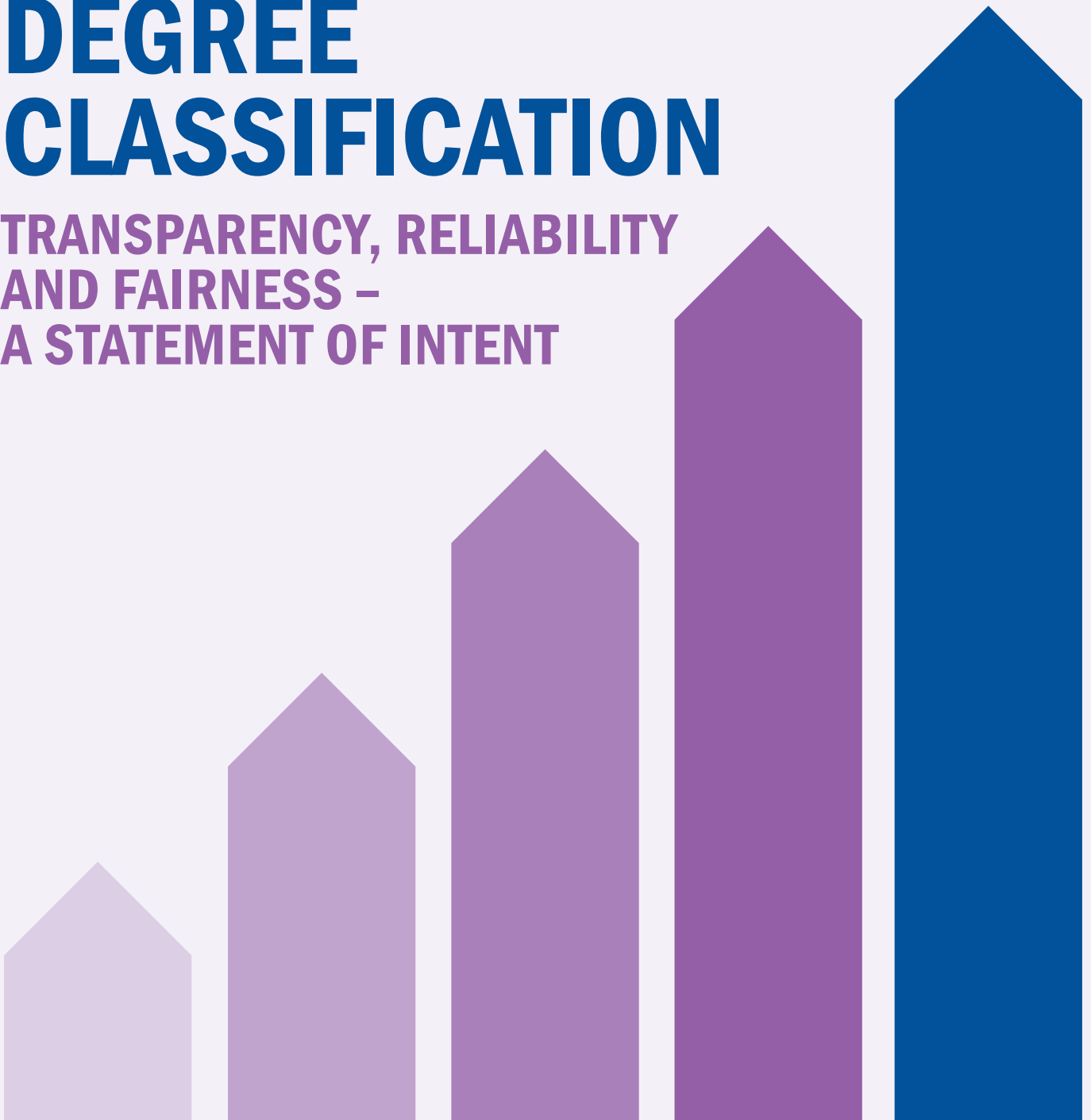
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DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

TRANSPARENCY, RELIABILITY
AND FAIRNESS –
A STATEMENT OF INTENT



The UK higher education sector is committed to protecting the value of UK degrees. This statement represents that commitment. It is signed by sector representative groups and endorsed by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, and is founded on the following principles:

- Protecting the value of qualifications is in the interest of students – past, present and future – who deserve qualifications that they can take pride in.
- All higher education institutions are responsible for protecting the value and the sustainability of the classification system.
- Qualifications should be based on clear criteria that recognise, demonstrate, and celebrate academic stretch and success.
- Higher education institutions are responsible for awarding degrees that benefit from common arrangements to protect their value.
- The diversity of the UK higher education sector is a strength which is founded on shared, consistent, and comparable academic practices.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

UK higher education institutions will to continue to protect the value of degrees by:

- a. ensuring assessment and classification criteria stretch and challenge all their students, including meeting and exceeding shared sector qualifications criteria
- b. reviewing and explaining how their process for calculating final classifications¹:
 - fully reflect student attainment against learning criteria
 - protect the integrity of classification boundary conventions
 - maintain comparability of qualifications in the sector and over time
- c. enabling staff to protect the value of qualification by:
 - supporting opportunities for academics to work as external examiners, including professional development and subject calibration activities
 - supporting new, and existing, academics and external examiners to apply institutional assessment criteria and regulations
 - reviewing and reiterating policies on internal and external moderation to ensure they enable challenge
- d. reviewing and publishing student outcomes data as part of the ongoing calibration of assessment and classification practices

This statement builds on the findings and recommendations of the research report ‘*Degree classification: transparent, consistent and fair academic standards*’ and the outcomes of the associated consultation presented in ‘*Transparency, reliability and fairness in degree classification: consultation report*’.

1. Further information on common degree algorithms components is set out in annexe a.

IMPLEMENTING THE STATEMENT OF INTENT

To help achieve the aims and objectives of the statement, institutions should take the following steps through their national quality assessment arrangements.

ENGLAND

Institutions awarding degrees should publish a ‘*degree outcomes statement*’ articulating the results of an internal institutional review. We believe that this step will help institutions to assure themselves that they are meeting the expectations of the Quality Code, and the Office for Students’ ongoing conditions of registration (B4 and B5) that relate to protecting the value of qualifications, including:

- i. quantitative trends in student degree outcomes over time, including the impact of student demographics, subject mix and academic regulations
- ii. whether assessment criteria meet common sector reference points and are applied consistently by academic staff and external examiners
- iii. whether the rationale for degree algorithm(s) is clear and publicly accessible
- iv. whether the institution is making use of Advance HE’s external examiner professional development programme and subject-specific calibration activity, or providing alternative arrangements

Governing bodies or academic senates should incorporate external assurance of the degree outcomes statement, either through existing or new arrangements, such as a dedicated external advisor on degree classification.

Where appropriate, the degree awarding body should work with providers whose awards they accredit to inform their degree outcomes statement.

Degree outcomes statements, outlining the outcomes of the review and associated actions, should be published in the academic year 2019–20.

NORTHERN IRELAND

The statement is secured by the Annual Performance Review (APR) process, including:

- assurance statements from a provider’s governing body, focusing on continuous improvement of students’ academic experiences and outcomes; and the steps taken to assure (with externality) degree standards at all classification levels, especially at the threshold level
- scrutiny of student and other data already submitted to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Department for Education – Northern Ireland (DfE-NI) and presented as an ‘APR dashboard’.

Institutions in Northern Ireland would consider where it may be appropriate to incorporate the high-level principles of the statement of intent into this process – and where additional internal review may be necessary as regards to classification practices, support for external examiners through the Advance HE external examining programme, and calibration of assessment criteria against the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.

SCOTLAND

The statement of intent is secured by Scotland's distinctive Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF). It includes rigorous institution-led review using external reference points and external review on a five-year cycle, known as Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR). The QEF includes a firm commitment to student partnership and a national suite of Enhancement Themes. Institutions demonstrate they meet the expectations of the Quality Code which is confirmed as a formal part of ELIR. Each year every institution reports to the Scottish Funding Council on the outcomes of its institution-led review, and these reports inform annual meetings between each institution and QAA Scotland. QAA Scotland shares sector-wide analysis of these reports to help identify trends.

Institutions make extensive use of data as part of the QEF, not least in the current Enhancement Theme, *Evidence for Enhancement: improving the student experience*, in which the sector collectively seeks to improve its use of data and wider evidence to benefit students. Previous enhancement activity has considered student support, research-teaching linkages, assessment, feedback on assessment, and graduate skills and attributes.

The Scottish sector has considered degree classifications data and has identified several factors influencing the upward trend, including the increase in entry tariffs over the period and the extensive work carried out by the sector, and institutions individually, to support student success. The sector is committed to undertaking further work aimed at understanding the classifications profile and the work will be overseen by the Quality Arrangements in Scottish Higher Education (QASHE) group which brings together the parties to the QEF alongside the Scottish Government.

WALES

Implementation of the statement of intent is secured by the Quality Assessment Framework (QAF) and elements of the Quality Enhancement Review process. The process of review outlined for a degree outcomes statement in England can be adapted by Welsh institutions as part of their internal evaluation and contextualised self-evaluation of quality and risk. Principles of the QAF include:

- use of peer review and appropriate external scrutiny as a core component of quality assessment and assurance approaches
- accountability, value for money and easily understood assurance to students, employers, government
- robust evidence to identify and exploit opportunities for continuous improvement

Institutions will consider how they are supporting academic staff to work as external examiners, including whether the institution is making use of Advance HE's external examiners training and subject-specific calibration activities, or providing alternative arrangements for professional development.

The Welsh sector may collectively consider the role of shared qualifications frameworks and classification descriptions within assessment practice to ensure academic stretch and challenge for students above and beyond current thresholds.

SECTOR-LEVEL ACTIONS

As a sector, we are committed to considering ways in which long-established conventions and practices may need to adapt, and how they can remain relevant and sustainable for our students and for employers.

To support the implementation of the statement of intent, the UKSCQA working with its members, including the sector representative groups will:

- work to raise awareness of the statement of intent across the higher education sector and with employers, emphasising the value of degrees
- review the outcomes resulting from the statement of intent, including a sector-level profile of actions one year on from publication
- work with HESA to develop data tools that can support institutions to understand and benchmark their own degree outcomes and patterns
- engage with league table providers to ensure student decision-making is not distorted by the inclusion of degree outcomes data in ranking methodologies
- keep the need for additional information on degree outcomes under consideration, including the Higher Education Achievement Report

ANNEXE A: EXPLAINING DEGREE CLASSIFICATION ALGORITHMS

This section is included to aid common understanding of degree algorithm practices in use by higher education institutions across the UK.

A degree algorithm is the process or set of rules that institutions follow to determine the final classification of a course or programme. Algorithms are set within a broad context, and are informed – among other things – by disciplinary approaches, programme structures and wider quality assurance arrangements. Common elements include:

- **Aggregation method:** including whether or not to consider all eligible modules or units (weighted average approaches), or the most frequently awarded marks or classifications over the programme (modal or preponderance approaches).
- **Level of study and weighting:** how different years or levels of study are counted in the final classification. Common decisions include whether to include some first year/level 4 performance and the balance of weighting between later years, eg a 50/50 split through to 100% final year weighting.
- **Discounting:** whether outlier or low marks are systematically discarded (up to a specified proportion of credits), and ‘condonement’ where failure of a module or unit does not disqualify a student from progressing or receiving an award. This does not include measures applied in special circumstances.
- **Borderline rules and zones of consideration:** whether additional consideration, typically through academic boards, is given to a student’s final classification when the average score is within a certain distance from a classification band.
- **Resits and retakes:** whether or not, and when, to permit students to retake modules or units where they have failed to achieve a pass mark, including decisions on how many credits, maximum possible marks, and at which levels.

Further information about degree algorithms and common practices can be found in the report ‘Understanding Degree Algorithms’ (UUK 2017)

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