



DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

TRANSPARENT, CONSISTENT
AND FAIR ACADEMIC
STANDARDS –
CONSULTATION ANALYSIS



Distinction and Diversity
in Higher Education



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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.

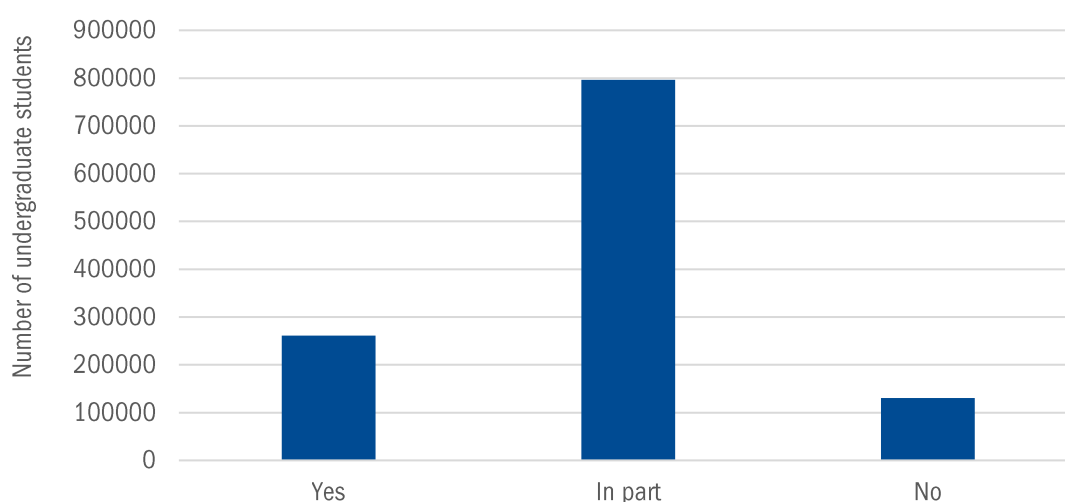
Among the 109 respondents providing identifying information, where their respective nation could be assigned, the most responses came from England (75). There were 13 UK-wide respondents, 12 were from Scotland, five from Wales, and four were from Northern Ireland.

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:

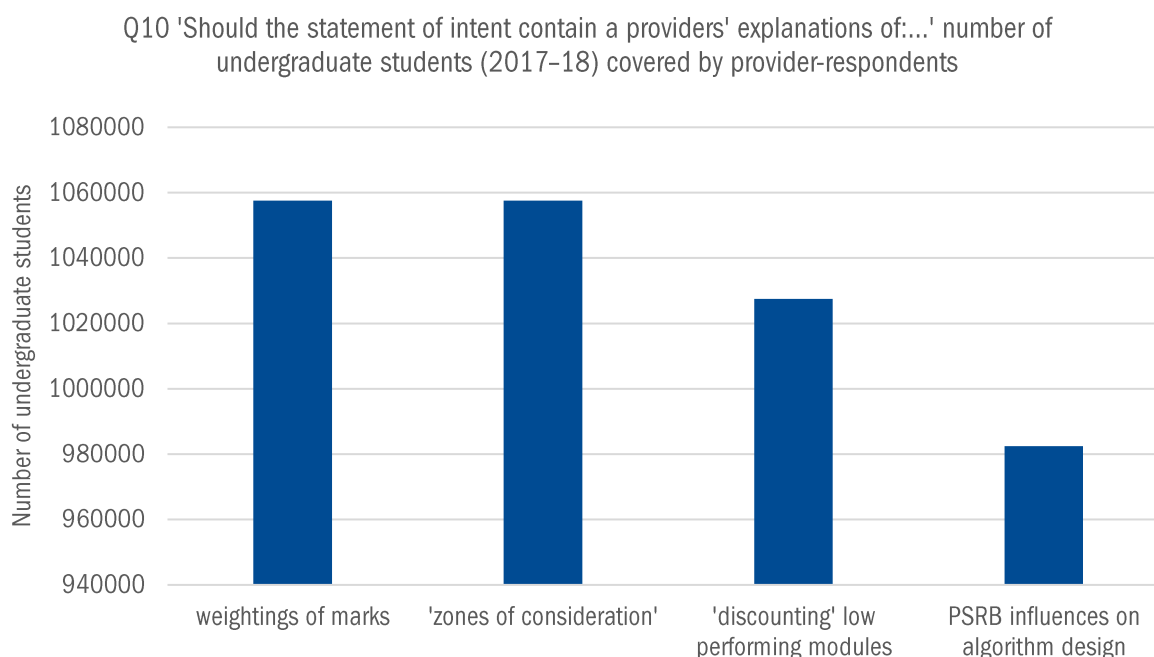
- institutional grade profiles
- academic governance
- classification algorithms
- marking practices
- equalities assessments

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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