# DEGREE OUTCOMES STATEMENT

Institutional degree classification profile

This statement highlights findings following an analysis of undergraduate degree outcomes in the period between 2014/15 and 2018/19. During this time the University has seen a steady increase in the number of first-class and upper-second awards ('upper degrees') it has conferred. However, as demonstrated in the table below, whilst the gap to the sector is narrowing, the University continues to award proportionately fewer upper degrees in comparison to other institutions.
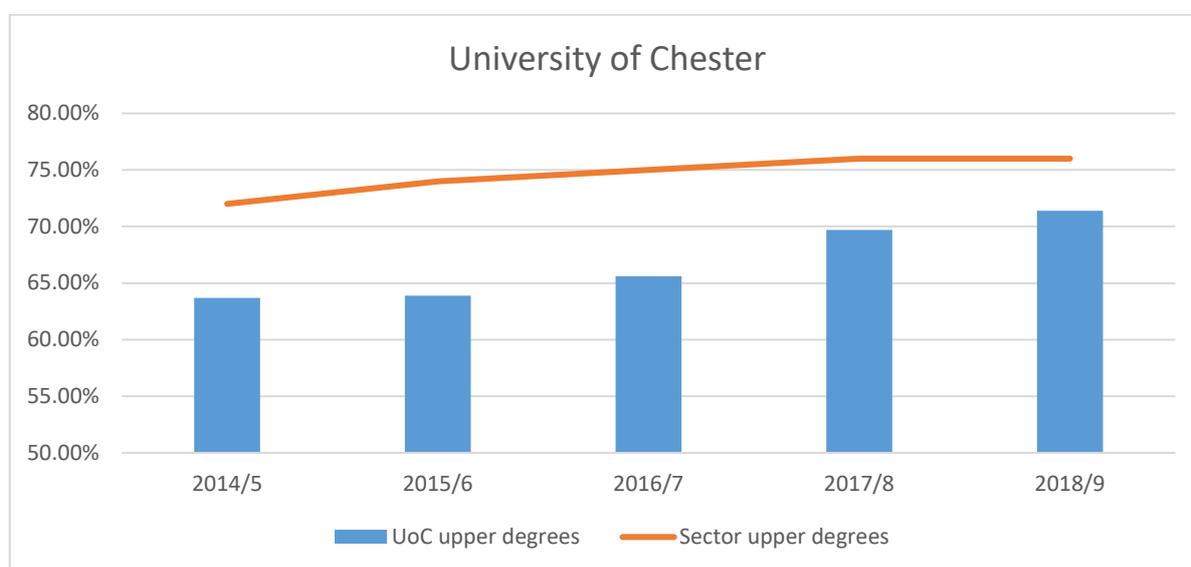
The University has considered the award of upper degrees across a range of student characteristics; this information is provided at appendix A[1]. It shows that more females than males are awarded an upper degree and there is also a fluctuating awarding gap between those students with a declared disability and those without. There is a persistent gap between the number of white students being awarded an upper degree in comparison to all other ethnic minority groups. These differences are a key focus of the work that the University is doing to fulfil its Access and Participation Plan. It should be noted that success in this is likely to lead to a further increase in the overall percentage of students achieving upper degrees.

Additionally, the University has conducted an analysis of awards in comparison to entry qualifications, which is somewhat more complex (appendix B). There has been a steady increase in the number of students with non-traditional entry qualifications being awarded upper degrees, whilst there continues to be an awarding gap between A-Level and BTEC

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[1] Data in this statement is reproduced from HESA (https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/outcomes) and the OfS Access and Participation Dashboard (https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/)

entrants. Work to further understand the reasons behind this needs to be undertaken in the coming months.

Appendix C details subject outcomes (using Level 1 of the Common Aggregation Hierarchy) over the review period. This data shows variation in outcomes by subject across the University; this is not unexpected nor unusual across the sector. When looking at the average proportion of upper degrees awarded by subject during the five-year period, we can see that a majority of University subject areas lag the sector average. Those areas that show a higher average than the sector do so only modestly.

Assessment and marking practices

The University's quality management framework is mapped against the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. This ensures that programmes of study approved by the University are written using a range of external reference points such as the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and, where available, QAA Subject Benchmark Statements. Similarly, the University's generic marking criteria for undergraduate degree programmes was drafted to ensure alignment with the FHEQ. These processes ensure that the University's threshold standards for all levels meet sector recognised standards.

Assessment arrangements benefit from the input of External Examiners at both the beginning and end of the process. They are involved in the approval of assessment components accounting for more than half of a module mark, as well as in the scrutiny of the marking process prior to ratification of marks by the Assessment Boards. These colleagues are appointed according to criteria that includes, in addition to their subject expertise, their significant knowledge and experience of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education. At the conclusion of the assessment process each External Examiner submits a report which seeks their assurance of the effectiveness of the University's processes to maintain appropriate academic standards. Reports are considered and responded to by academic staff with responsibility for programme management, they are scrutinized by the Academic Quality and Standards department and an overview report is considered by the Academic Quality and Enhancement Committee on behalf of Senate.

In addition to the ongoing work of our External Examiners, the adoption of the generic undergraduate marking criteria has significantly aided consistency of marking during the review period. These detailed criteria cover four domains[2] and apply to all subject areas. Programme and Module Leaders use the generic criteria as a reference point when drafting the specific marking criteria for each assessment task. As well as enhancing consistency, the use of the generic marking criteria provides clarity and supports students to understand what they are required to do in order to succeed. The graduating cohort in 2017/18 were

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[2] The four domains are 'knowledge and understanding', 'cognitive skills', 'practical or professional skills' and 'communication skills'.

amongst the first to benefit from the routine use of the generic marking criteria and this may account for the increase in the award of upper degrees compared to the previous year.

Equity and the fair treatment of all students undergoing assessment is of paramount importance. The University has a number of strategies and supportive mechanisms in place to ensure that these principles are at the heart of our assessment processes. The Academic Integrity Policy sets out expectations of students when submitting assessments and how the University deals firmly with any behaviour that threatens to undermine the quality of the awards that it makes. Those students who are hampered in preparing their best work for assessment, through illness or other personal circumstances, are supported through the Mitigating Circumstances process and, as a last resort, the Academic Appeals process.

Academic governance

The University's arrangements for securing credible academic standards and maintaining the value of its awards over time are set out in the Principles and Regulations and the Quality and Standards Manual. Both of these documents are reviewed and updated annually, taking into account external developments in the sector and institutional learning arising from our comprehensive monitoring and review arrangements. All learning, teaching and assessment activity must take place in accordance with the requirements laid out in these documents and their contents applies to all provision approved for delivery both at the University and by our collaborative partners. In relation to the latter, partners are required to submit an annual review of their academic activity and are subject to a periodic review at intervals of no less than five years.

Requirements pertaining to the assessment of undergraduate students are contained in Handbook F of the Quality and Standards Manual. The Chairs of the Module Assessment Boards (MABs) are normally Heads of Department and have responsibility for ensuring that all staff involved in assessment adhere to these requirements in partnership with Registry. The Academic Quality and Standards department is responsible for monitoring compliance and investigating concerns whether raised by students, staff or External Examiners.

The University operates a two-tier system of Assessment Boards. Once individual module marks are agreed by the MABs, the Awards Assessment Board (AAB) is responsible for ratifying marks and determining an overall outcome for each student. The work of the AAB is scrutinized by two University Chief External Examiners to ensure consistency and fairness. The University is grateful to the Chief External Examiners for their confirmation of the contents of this degree outcomes statement based on their knowledge of the University's processes.

It is notable that during the review period on those few regrettable occasions when students have exercised their right to complain to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education about an assessment decision, the University has successfully demonstrated the fairness and robustness of its procedures on each occasion.

Classification algorithms

The University's classification algorithm for Honours Degrees is longstanding and has not undergone any material amendment during the review period. It is described in section 8 of Handbook F of the Quality and Standards Manual. In summary, each student's degree classification is calculated on a weighted average of their marks of the highest 100 credits at Level 5 (one third) and of the highest 100 credits at Level 6 (two thirds). The advantage of this approach is in its fairness to all students and its simplicity which aids widespread understanding. Registry make available explanations and worked examples of the algorithm in practice to all students and other stakeholders via guidance that accompanies the relevant Handbook.

Decisions about individual degree classifications are rules based and over the review period all remaining elements of discretion have been removed. This ensures a transparent and equitable approach for all students. The algorithm permits automatic uplifts for students with an average mark no more than 3% from the classification boundary provided that at least half of their Level 6 credits have been awarded a mark in the higher classification band. Whilst this is a generous policy, it is not unique in the sector. Similarly, the University adheres to sector norms in respect of resit opportunities. All students who fail to achieve the required standard at the first attempt are afforded a second and, if necessary, a third attempt.

Teaching practices and learning resources

The latest available data from HESA (2018/19) demonstrates that over 94% of the University's academic staff hold a teaching qualification. This is the highest proportion for any of the providers listed in HESA's data for this measure. Such sustained investment in the quality of teaching at the University is inevitably evident in the percentage of students who are awarded an upper degree.

An enhanced partnership between academic programme teams and their External Examiners is evident through the submitted annual reports. Over the review period there have been a number of examples of External Examiners actively encouraging programme teams to use the full range of numerical marks so as not to artificially suppress student achievement. Considered alongside the safeguards for maintaining academic standards outlined elsewhere in this statement, the University can be confident that a greater use of marks at the higher-end of the scale is not indicative of any inflationary practice.

The development of the generic marking criteria has been described earlier in this statement; the contribution of the criteria towards fostering a greater shared understanding of academic standards between students and staff has been significant.

A further key development over the review period has been the establishment of the Study Skills service as part of the University's Learning and Teaching Institute. By combining the approach of the LTI to support the professional development of academic staff as teachers,

with the student-facing role of the Study Skills service, the University has systematically embedded the acquisition of study skills into the curriculum. This approach has the effect of helping not just those students who may require additional support to reach the threshold standard, but also those achieving at the higher classification boundaries.

Identifying good practice and actions

During the 2018/19 academic year the University undertook significant review of its assessment practice and developed a number of proposals that in the process of being implemented. The review identified a number of actions that the University will further support students to achieve, whilst protecting the standards of the awards that it makes. For example, recommendations on the volume of assessment across programmes will mean that students are stretched and challenged to demonstrate achievement; whilst a more systematised approach to teaching about assessment will further aid students in their understanding of what is required of them.
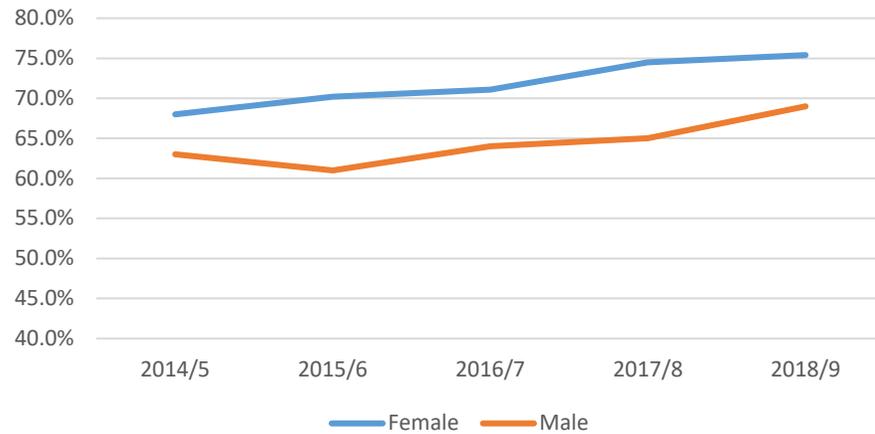
At a strategic governance level, the publication of the *Principles for Effective Degree Algorithm Design* by the UK Standing Council for Quality Assessment in July 2020 will require further consideration about the University's approach over the course of the 2020/21 academic year. Moreover, work will be required to ensure the ongoing triangulation between the generic marking criteria, the Level 6 FHEQ degree classification descriptors and the University's degree classification algorithm. The University looks forward to providing an update on this statement and the actions contained herein during 2023/24.
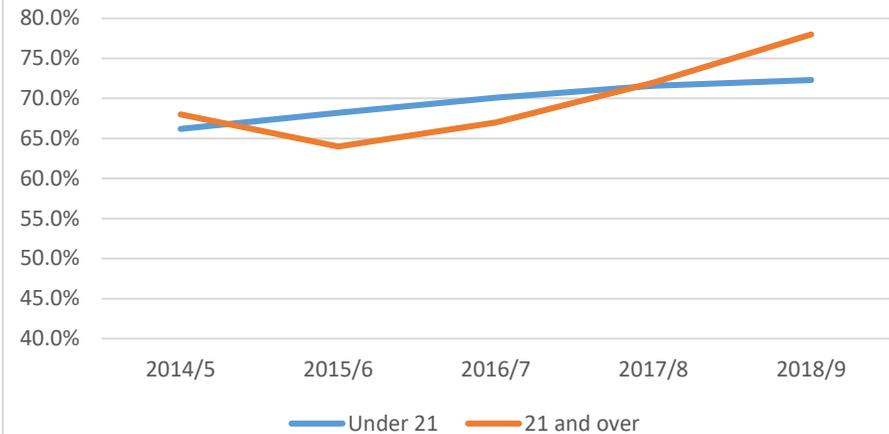
Concluding statement

The University continues to maintain oversight of the proportions of classifications it awards at all levels. Through our emerging work connected to the Access and Participation Plan, we will continue to understand the gaps between different student groups and how these can be eliminated, whilst maintaining our rigorous academic standards. Our efforts will be focussed on relentless enhancement of the quality of the learning and teaching that we provide and on strengthening our individualised approach, supporting each student to tailor their University experience according to their specific needs.

Our focus on clarity and transparency in assessment has aided greater numbers of our students to achieve good outcomes over the last five years. The methodology we use to determine degree classifications has remained static during the review period. At every stage, our External Examiners have assured us that our academic standards are appropriate and robust and our processes secure. Consequently, the University can take pride in the knowledge that the increases seen in the award of upper degrees during the review period are attributable entirely to the dedication of our staff and the hard work of our students.
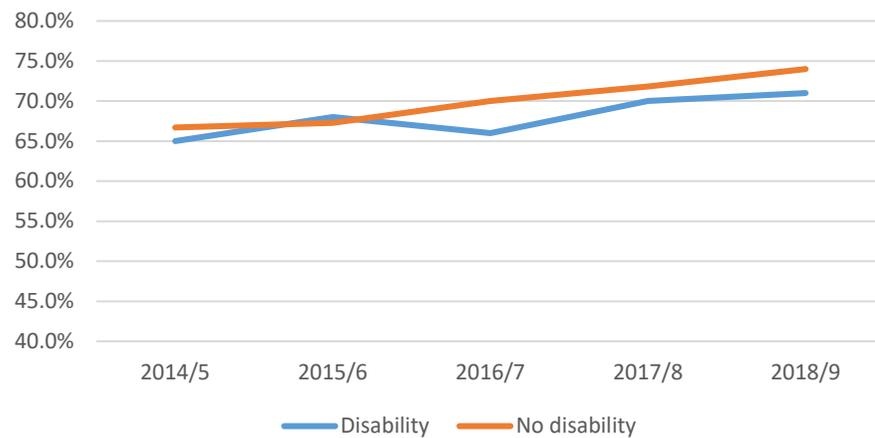
University of Chester

Upper Degrees by Sex

Upper Degrees by Age

Upper Degrees by Declared Disability

Upper Degrees by Ethnicity

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1st & 2.1 Aggregate by Entry Qualification

A line chart showing percentages from 40.0% to 80.0% across years 2014/5 to 2018/9, with lines for A level, Access, BTEC, and Other entry qualifications.

1st & 2.1 Aggregate by Tariff Bands
5 years Data Aggregated

A line chart showing percentages from 40.0% to 100.0% across tariff bands 1 - 79, 80 - 119, 120 - 179, 180 - 239, 240 - 299, 300 - 359, 360 - 419, 420 - 479, 480 - 539, 540+.

Subject comparison: University of Chester and Sector

Legend: ■ Sector ■ UoC