

## Russell Group response to degree classification consultation

### 1. Summary

- We welcome the work conducted by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) to better understand trends in rising degree attainment. Whilst further consultation will be required with students, graduates, employers and universities, the proposed recommendations present a valuable opportunity to reflect on options for the development of the degree classification system.
- Russell Group universities are committed to safeguarding the value of their qualifications over time. This includes not only the maintenance of academic standards, but also a focus on the wider student experience and close ties between research and teaching.
- We welcome the opportunity to engage with others in the sector to consider how academic standards can continue to be maintained in future, including by enhancing the transparency and comparability of degree outcomes.
- The principles which are outlined in the consultation as central to the sector's response are helpful: maintaining the autonomy and diversity of the sector; enhancing current quality assurance arrangements; ensuring students are not unfairly disadvantaged; and continued use of criterion-referenced assessment and classification to ensure genuine improvements in student attainment continue to be recognised. These principles should underpin the development of the UK-wide statement of intent and its component parts.

### 2. Comments on the proposed statement of intent

#### *The degree outcomes statement*

- 2.1 We support, in principle, the proposal for a degree outcomes statement. The development of the statement should be flexible enough to recognise the diversity of the sector and ensure the assessment of student performance can continue to be reflective of specific disciplines and institutions.
- 2.2 The statement should reflect the complexity of factors which affect degree attainment and so avoid being overly prescriptive. This should include recognition of the tension between addressing perceptions of "grade inflation" and ensuring genuine improvements in student attainment continue to be reflected.
- 2.3 For example, whilst teaching quality is difficult to measure, trends in student satisfaction, continuation and professional employment have all been positive over recent years suggesting we should expect degree attainment to rise accordingly. Likewise, the annual UK Engagement Survey has shown that student engagement across a range of areas is increasing over time, including on critical thinking, research and inquiry, and interacting with other students and staff. Approaches which encourage academic engagement by students are, therefore, likely to be key to improving degree attainment.
- 2.4 In addition, efforts to address attainment gaps by ethnicity and social background and so drive inclusivity within institutions may be at variance with efforts to address trends in rising degree attainment.

- 2.5 Any changes to academic regulations or assessment practices should also ensure students are not unfairly penalised and consideration is given to the impact which various approaches could have on specific groups, especially BME students and those from a widening participation background who are likely to have lower prior attainment on average as a result of inequalities in the education system. Any efforts to address rising degree attainment should not undermine the pursuit of educational equity at university.
- 2.6 In developing the statement further, the UKSCQA should also consider how any sector-wide commitments will impact on arrangements in place across the four nations. There needs to be a joined-up approach reflecting the requirements of processes in the devolved nations. For example, in Wales there is already a focus on academic governance as part of the quality assessment framework so duplication in this area will need to be avoided.

#### *External assurance*

- 2.7 While some universities have appointed an external advisor on academic standards, this model may not be appropriate for all institutions. Appointing one individual to carry out this role in a comprehensive university with a wide range and breadth of disciplines would be very challenging and may not therefore be effective in strengthening assurance.

#### *External examiners*

- 2.8 External examiners should continue to play an important role in the process for assuring academic standards. We support continued efforts with regard to the professional development of academic staff and external examiners. A number of Russell Group universities are already participating in the Degree Standards project led by Advance HE, which has trained 1,200 external examiners so far. As noted in the consultation document, this has the potential to be an important resource and we await the outcome of this work with interest.
- 2.9 In taking this forward, it will be important to balance any recognition for professional development with the need to ensure mechanisms are in place to encourage academics to act as external examiners as recruitment to this role can be challenging.

#### *Degree algorithms*

- 2.10 We support the proposal to ensure degree algorithms are transparent and accessible for students, staff and external stakeholders.
- 2.11 Sharing good practice across the sector would also be helpful. However, any work to encourage consistency in this area should avoid reducing academic authority over marking and classification.

#### *Classification descriptions*

- 2.12 The proposed classification descriptions could act as a reference point to aid the development and consistency of academic practice and quality assurance processes. However, they should not replace a provider's institutional and subject-level assessment criteria or marking schemes but provide a sector-wide description within which autonomous degree awarding bodies can set their own academic standards. This is important as graduates from different disciplines will have varying levels of competency in different areas.
- 2.13 Further work would also be needed to ensure the descriptions could be adopted as a reference point alongside all frameworks for higher education standards in the UK nations.

2.14 Any publication of the classification descriptions would, therefore, need to include a clear statement that these are indicative only. The proposed descriptions may be better placed as part of the advice and guidance section of the Quality Code rather than incorporated into national quality assurance and regulatory frameworks.

### *Calibration*

2.15 We welcome the proposal to review the role and use of data in institutional quality assurance and calibration practices. However, further consideration is needed regarding what an appropriate metric would look like and what purpose it would serve.

2.16 Basing benchmarks on trends in past graduate achievement may not be an accurate way to judge current and future student attainment. For example, research from the Office for Students found some institutions are rewarding fewer “good honours” degrees than we would expect based on past achievement and changes in student demographics, despite these same providers having awarded an increasing proportion of first and upper-second class degrees in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

2.17 It will be important to ensure any shared sector benchmark methodology accurately reflects institutional variation and other factors impacting on trends in attainment. An inappropriate use of benchmarking could risk encouraging institutions to focus on achieving norms rather than attempting to genuinely improve student performance. There are a number of factors leading to genuine improvements in student attainment which it will be difficult to account for, including investment in teaching staff and infrastructure. Changes such as the focus on publishing detailed marking criteria for students will also arguably have led to rising standards.

### *Reviewing the structure of the degree classification system*

2.18 Whilst it may be helpful to consider the reform options presented in the consultation document, none of them would directly address perceived issues with “grade inflation”, but rather focus on providing more information about student performance.

2.19 If this is felt to be helpful, an option which could be considered in the shorter-term would be promoting greater use of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) across the sector. While employers are not using HEAR systematically, recent research has shown there has been a substantial increase in third parties viewing HEAR data, and once awareness of the tool has been established employers are positive about the value which HEAR can bring to the recruitment process.<sup>2</sup>

2.20 If the sector were to commission a task and finish group to examine the longer-term sustainability of degree classification conventions, it would be vital that the group had a clearly defined remit based on an understanding of the problems it wished to address. It should also contain broad representation from within academia as well as employer groups and students.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/analysis-of-degree-classifications-over-time-changes-in-graduate-attainment/>

<sup>2</sup> *The Higher Education Achievement Report: an update on implementation*, January 2018