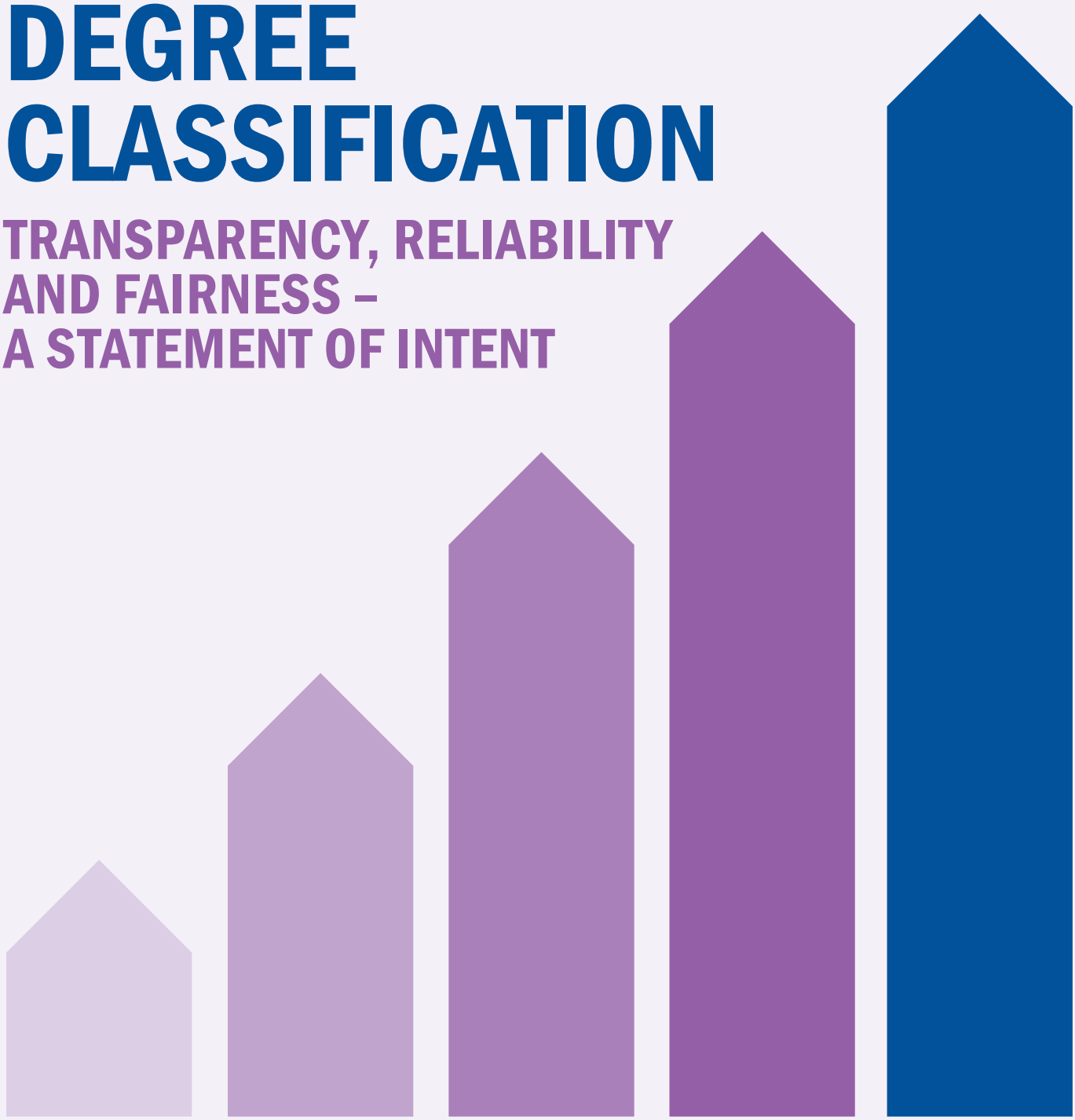
UKSCQA
UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

TRANSPARENCY, RELIABILITY AND FAIRNESS – A STATEMENT OF INTENT



Universities UK

Distinction and Diversity in Higher Education
GuildHE

QAA

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 classifications[1]:
- 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)

This publication is the result of research and public consultation conducted by Universities UK, GuildHE and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education on behalf and with the support 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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CMA Competition & Markets Authority

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Department for the Economy www.economy-ni.gov.uk

Office for Students OfS

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Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

hefcw

QAA

nus national union of students

oia office of the independent adjudicator

Scottish Funding Council
Promoting further and higher education

Universities Scotland

Universities Wales Prifysgolion Cymru

Universities UK

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May 2019

ISBN 978-1-84036-424-8

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