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1. Introduction

The University of Exeter is an autonomous Higher Education provider holding university title and degree awarding powers under the **Higher Education and Research Act 2017**. This autonomy means that the University is responsible for setting and maintaining the academic standards and quality of its undergraduate degrees and other qualifications. It does this within the context of the academic policies and ordinances of its **Council**, and in accordance with the procedures, frameworks, codes of good practice and guidance set out within its **Teaching Quality Assurance Manual (TQA)**.

The purpose of this statement is, therefore, to present prospective and current undergraduate students, academic partners, stakeholders and other interested parties with information, and thus assurance, on how the University monitors and manages the academic standards of its undergraduate awards at Levels 4-6 of the **Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree Awarding Bodies**, now incorporated into the **Regulatory Framework for Higher Education in England**.

The statement also aims to meet the expectations of the **UK Standing Committee on Quality Assessment (UKSCQA)** to ensure transparency, reliability and fairness in relation to degree outcomes for all University of Exeter students, whatever their background or journey to, and through, Higher Education. It, therefore, highlights both degree awarding trends and degree awarding gaps between different demographic groups of students, and the University's respective responses.

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Over the past five years, there has been an upward trend in the number of 1st and 2:1s (together referred to as 'good honours degrees') awarded by the University and an associated decline in the award of 2:2 and 3rd class degrees. Most noticeable has been the increase in 1st class degrees, as a sub-set of 'good honours degrees', from 26% in 2016/17 to 39% in 2020/21. Reference to 'good honours degrees' alone can mask 1st class awarding trends and awarding gaps and so this version of the Statement reports on both.

Please refer to Section 2.5 below for analysis of how the implementation of the University's No Disadvantage Guarantee may have influenced degree outcomes for 2020/21.



This section presents the trends illustrated in Section 2 above, in comparison with the same trends for the following groups within the Higher Education sector:

- **All** – all undergraduate degree awarding institutions;
- **RI** – a group of research-intensive Universities, of which the University of Exeter is part; and
- **C** – a self-selected group of similar institutions within the sector.

The data is drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student Outcomes Data Set for the



The University's overall trend of an increase in the award of 'good honours degrees' is mirrored across all comparator groups. However, it is not mirrored across all

The University is confident that its commitment to excellence in teaching and learning, alongside investment in educational facilities, resources and support services has had a positive impact on academic outcomes for its students. However, there is a need for more definitive evidence to establish a clear relationship between such factors and the increase in 'good honours degrees' and 1st class degrees awarded. The University will, therefore, be undertaking further research and analysis to better understand the multiple contributions to the improvements in awards.

Additional data held by the University indicates that there are differences in the degree awarding profiles of individual Colleges and between Disciplines within those Colleges. During the 2021/22 academic year, the University has further reviewed its College and Discipline level degree outcomes for the period 2016/17 to 2020/21 and compared them with more granular data from the HESA Student Outcomes Data Set for 2020/21. This has enabled Disciplines to be benchmarked with related disciplines at Russell Group, Competitor Group and Sector level. This data will be used by the Disciplines, their Assessment Progression and Awarding Committees (APACs) (see Section 3 below) and their External Examiners (see Section 3 below) to provide further assurance of degree standards (see Section 7).

The University recognises that awarding gaps exist between some of its demographic groups of students and it is committed to driving down and eliminating such gaps. These are defined by the OfS as '... identified gaps in degree outcomes for underrepresented groups when compared with their peers'². It should be noted that the data above relates to all undergraduate students at the University, including international students. There may, therefore, be some differences in the gaps shown above and those identified in the University's [Access and Participation Plan 2020/21-2024/25](#). This plan utilises data from the OfS's [Access and Participation Data Dashboard](#), which covers UK-Domiciled students only.

Additional data held by the University indicates that there are also differences in the scale of awarding gaps shown between individual Colleges and between Disciplines within those Colleges. The University is undertaking further analysis to support consideration and actions at a finer-grained level of detail (see Section 7). There have been some improvements since 2016/17, with awarding gaps reduced or closed. However, addressing such disparities remains a top priority for the University, in particular, reducing both the 'good honours degree' and 1st class degree awarding gaps between students from Asian, Black, Mixed and Other (ABMO) ethnicities and white students. This is, therefore, an area in which the University is committed to, and engaged in, further research, analysis and action at both strategic and operational levels (see Section 7 for further information).

Please refer to Section 2.5 below for analysis of how the implementation of the University's No Disadvantage Guarantee may have influenced degree outcomes for 2020/21.

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It is an expectation of the UKSCQA that governing bodies or academic senates should incorporate external assurance into the preparation of their Degree Outcomes Statements. The University has, therefore, made an appointment to the role of University **Principal External Examiner** from the 2020/21 academic year onwards (see Section 7 for further details).

Arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment delivered through partnership arrangements are outlined in the University's **Academic Partnerships Handbook** and the **Validated and Accredited Awards** that may be delivered in partnership are listed in its Regulations.

9. Classification Algorithms

Degree classification algorithms are the rules by which degree awarding bodies consistently determine the degree classification for individual final year undergraduate students. Algorithms may vary slightly from one university to another but are typically based on the weightings attributed to each stage or year of study and the final credit weighted mean mark achieved.

The University of Exeter's approach to determining undergraduate degree classifications may be found in **Chapter 9** of its **Assessment, Progression and Awarding: Taught Programmes Handbook**. More specifically, the Rules for the Classification of Bachelors and Integrated Masters Degrees are set out in **Section 9.4**. The degree algorithms are applied rigorously and consistently by Discipline APACs and verified by College APACs. Any exceptions, such as Aegrotat Awards made under **Ordinance 16** of the University's Regulations, must be approved by the Academic Dean for Students / Dean of the Faculty of Taught Programmes at the University APAC.

As noted in Section 2.5 above, a change was made to the University's degree algorithm for the 2020/21 academic year, as part of its **No Disadvantage Guarantee**. This change involved a 1% expansion of the borderline zone for the application of preponderance rules. For example, for undergraduate degrees, a student would be considered for a 1st class degree classification if their final credit-weighted stage mean mark fell between 67% and 69.49% (above 69.5% a student would automatically be awarded a 1st class degree). Students falling into this borderline zone would be considered for the next level of degree classification provided that least 50% of their stage weighted credits have module marks greater than or equal to 70% for a 1st class degree. Similar rules apply to the lower classifications of degrees.

To ensure that academic standards are upheld, there are consequences for failure in individual assessments and modules, and whilst referrals and repeat study are permitted within strict limits, the maximum grades that may be achieved are capped at the pass mark of 40%. Students may, however, apply for Mitigation, which if approved would permit them additional time or an additional opportunity to complete an assessment without penalty. Further information on the consequences of failure in assessment is available in **Chapter 11** of the above Handbook.

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Examples of what are now annual reports include the following:

These present historic module data to support decision-making at Discipline-level APACs. Academic staff and External Examiners will consider whether scaling of marks should be undertaken if students' performance is exceptionally low or high when compared to previous academic years. Data is considered alongside other contextual factors.

These present Institutional, College and Discipline data across five academic years highlighting trends in both degree awarding patterns and awarding gaps between different groups of students. The reports support institutional decision-making on strategic actions and priorities and evaluation of the impact of policy change.

This utilises HESA degree classifications data collated by Jisc to present comparisons of the University degree classifications with the Russell Group, the University's self-selected Competitor Group and the sector as a whole. The reports primarily support Discipline-level decision-making to assure academic standards and the integrity of Exeter degrees.

The latter report, which was developed in 2021/22, actions a commitment made in previous versions of this Statement to undertake further research and analysis to understand and address differential awarding patterns across Colleges and Disciplines and ensure that they are aligned with the wider Higher Education sector. The report will enable the University to test the presumption that differences in awarding patterns for different Colleges and Disciplines reflect those of the sector as a whole and to respond accordingly where this may not be the case.

Academic colleagues across the Colleges and Disciplines are asked to access and consider the data and information provided in the Benchmarking Report. This will help to inform dialogues about academic standards at programme, Discipline and College level and feed into reviews of assessment design, marking practices and moderation. Opportunities for marking calibration activity between Disciplines within the same and different Colleges, or between related Disciplines at different institutions will also be explored.

In addition, the Discipline-specific data and information provided by the Benchmarking Report will be shared with External Examiners to assist them in undertaking their roles and responsibilities. It should enable them to determine whether or not the University's degree outcomes are comparable to similar Disciplines elsewhere in the sector, beyond their own institution or others they have experienced in an External Examining capacity.

Commitment to Success for All

Throughout this Statement, the University has identified areas in which further research and analysis is required to better understand the factors giving rise to the institutional degree classification profile identified. The University's Degree Outcomes Steering Group continues to play an important role in maintaining progress on this commitment by facilitating a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach to the collation, presentation, analysis and monitoring of degree outcomes data, through the dual lenses of supporting 'Success for All' and ensuring the integrity of Exeter degrees.

