

CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Degree classification: transparent, consistent and fair academic standards

LIST OF CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. Does the adoption of a UK sector-wide statement of intent represent an effective approach to meeting the challenges outlined in the report?

a.

Yes

b.

No

c.

In part.

There is clearly a public perception that has grown intense in recent years about the value of certain grades achieved by hard-working students at UK universities; although the more acute media and political pressure appears to be an English thing only. Higher education is a complex environment, highly diverse, and with no one set way of doing things. This obviously leads to confusion and mystery. It is right for UKSCQA, QAA and UUK to seek ways to address confusion and misperceptions and do what they can to ensure people have high-quality, robust information with which to make decisions. However, although recent reports from UUK and OfS acknowledge that once underlying variables have been allowed for there is an unexplained element to grade increases, it is also clear that unexplained does not mean wrong. Much of the increase can be as a consequence of factors such as entry level and prior attainment, improvements in learning and teaching, and better understanding of how assessment is managed at universities. There appears to be no clear-cut, robust evidence of nefarious “grade inflation” but concerns are being raised about some of the improvements that have been made over time.

Although it is clear to see how and why the organisations involved have come to the view that a sector-wide statement on these issues is required, there is a risk of simply accepting criticism from external sources as completely valid and unworthy of challenge. A UK sector-wide statement needs to come with some context-setting that establishes the complex, autonomous, diverse nature of UK higher education. It should also be clear that even by its own analysis, a significant element of university development – that is major improvements in teaching, learning and assessment practices – could have a key part to play in increases in attainment over recent years. Improvements in attainment, especially where they have previously been gaps, should be applauded and recognised as the result of hard work by teachers and students.

The work by OfS and by UUK acknowledges that it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the impact and effect on attainment of better teaching by university staff, better learning by students, and better understanding of assessment criteria by all involved. These points should be made more robustly in the statement, and arguably before any of the other elements.

Please explain your response.

2. What other approaches could be explored to address the issues at a UK sector -wide level?
3. What do you consider a reasonable period for a provider to review its practices and enact appropriate changes?

The timetable suggested seems reasonable, but it should be flexible to take into account individual institutional circumstances, and allow for other regulatory requirements and/or any unforeseen events

4. How can the statement of intent be taken forward by the different national higher education systems of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland within their national quality and regulatory frameworks?

There is a risk that, despite education being a devolved matter, a particular media and political climate in England drives UK-wide body to impose change on higher education institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It may be that outside England these concerns are not shared, and so the statement of intent adds little value to the conversations in those sectors.

To avoid this, it is essential for the statement to undergo extensive consultation with institutions and representative organisations in all UK countries, and to avoid creating perceptions that practices are identical in all jurisdictions. Where a UK-wide approach is not possible, the statement should be clear about this, and fully (and without bias) explain where and why there is difference.

5. Are the evidence areas proposed at Table A for inclusion within a ' degree outcomes statement ' appropriate for supporting an institution to identify potential 'grade inflation' risks and provide assurance to maintain public confidence?

a.

Yes.

b.

No

c.

In part.

It would also be worth considering how to ensure that acquired “graduateness” attributes can be factored into assessments of achievements.

Please explain your response.

6. Do you consider there to be merit in gaining assurance from an ' external advisor on academic standards'?
- a. Yes (please explain your response)

There is likely to be merit from ensuring that an institution's academic standards are respected and seen as robust. It would be sensible to consider how such an approach would work within the existing external examiner system. The difficulty will arise if this is mandated upon universities, as that may conflict with principles of institutional autonomy. The correct approach may be to ensure there is an assurance process, with this approach as one example among many that institutions could adopt.

b. No (please set out any other mechanisms for enhancing external assurance)

7. What are the:

a. opportunities and/or

b. challenges associated with including the commitments to strengthening the external examiner system in the statement of intent?

Greater support and development for external examiners is welcome, and it is important that those involved are appropriately experienced and qualified. However, it will be important to retain the independence of the external examiner system, and the autonomy of institutions. Any moves to develop some sort of central register as was previously proposed are likely to be rebuffed again. It is important that the external examiner system avoids becoming too much like an Ofsted inspection framework with specific benchmarks. This would be very difficult to maintain as sector diversity increases; the flexibility and autonomy of the current external examiner system is a key strength.

8. What are the:

a. opportunities and/or

b. challenges associated with enhancing components of the UKPSF relating to external examiners?

9. What are the barriers to implementing the recommendations in 'Understanding degree algorithms', particularly the publication and explanation of degree algorithm practices?

10. Should the statement of intent contain a provider's explanations of:

a. weighting of marks?

Yes/No

b. 'zones of consideration'?

Yes/No

c. 'discounting' low performing modules?

Yes/No

d. PSRB influences on algorithm design?

Yes/No

Please explain your responses

It is appropriate that the statement of intent explains how and why decisions were made. However, it is important to retain institutional autonomy and not assume that one approach to these areas will be fit for all providers.

11. Does the proposed classification description in Annex A provide an appropriate reference point for degree classification practice?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Please explain your response.

12. Do you have any proposals for substantive changes to the classification criteria?

Please explain your response.

13. Do you agree that the proposed classification description should be incorporated into national quality assurance and regulatory frameworks, as is appropriate for different national contexts? In England, this would mean the use of the proposed classification description as 'sector-recognised standards' as defined in section 13(3) of HERA.

There is a risk, particularly as education is a devolved matter, that this will conflict with the diversity, autonomy and independence of different providers in different jurisdictions.

14. How should the proposed classification description be incorporated into:

- a. institutional practice
- b. other relevant documents or frameworks?

15. What are the:

- a. benefits
- b. challenges, and/or
- c. national considerations of using a shared sector metric to inform institutional self-assessment of degree classifications over time?

16. How should a sector metric for degree classifications over time be defined?

17. How can sector reference points be better used, with more consistency, by external examiners to support institutions to protect the value of qualifications over time?

18. Should the sector explore the steps that could be taken to remove, or reduce the impact of, the inclusion of upper degrees (1st and 2.1 awards) in algorithms used to rank university performance?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Please explain your response.

19. What should be the parameters and remit for a UK -wide task and finish group on the long-term sustainability of the UK's degree classification systems?

20. Which of the following options for reforming or enhancing the degree classification system should be considered in more detail? (Please indicate Yes/No)

Reform option

Yes/No

Introduction of new upper award -for example, a starred first

Introduction of a 'cohort ranking' -for example, providing additional information on graduates' position in the grade distribution

Resetting the classification boundaries -for example, moving up by 10 marks so 80 = 1st and so on

More regular review of Subject Benchmark Statements to keep pace with improvements in teaching and learning Universal HEAR format

Other (please explain)

Creating new categories of award risks devaluing awards that have already been achieved by students. Additionally, if the bluntness of award categories is an issue, a solution would be to look at ways in which student achievement (e.g. learning gains, graduateness, progress) be emphasised rather than rely on a single classification.

No reform required

21. Do you have any other comments on the proposals that have not been specifically asked in this consultation?