Degree Outcomes Statement 2024

University *of* Exeter

1. Purpose of the Statement

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 regulations and ordinances of its Council, and in accordance with the policies, 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 **Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies**, as incorporated into the **Regulatory framework for higher education in England**, and in accordance with **Conditions B4 and B5** of its registration with the Office for Students (OfS).

The statement also aims to meet the expectations of the Quality Council for UK Higher Education (formally the UK Standing Committee on Quality Assessment (UKSCQA)) **Statement of Intent**, and associated principles and guidance. Thereby, ensuring transparency, reliability and fairness in relation to degree outcomes for all University of Exeter undergraduate 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, including international students, and the University's respective responses.

2. Institutional Degree Classification Profile

2.1 Trends in Undergraduate Degree Classifications

This section presents trends in the classifications of degrees awarded by the University to all its undergraduate students between 2018/19 and 2022/23. This includes UK-domiciled and international students. The data is presented as the percentage, or proportion, of different degree classifications, awarded (1st, 2:1, 2:2 and 3rd). The focus is, however, primarily on the award of 1st class degrees, as a commonly used indicator of performance and change over time.

The data also includes Integrated Masters Degrees, which are four-year, Level 7 FHEQ programmes, predominantly in engineering, mathematics, sciences and healthcare, which incorporate an undergraduate honours degree. The results for students on the Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery (BMBS), who are not awarded traditional degree classifications have been excluded from the data. The degree stage attainment data for this group of students is, however, internally reviewed and responded to.

Figure 1: University of Exeter Trends in Undergraduate Degree Classifications
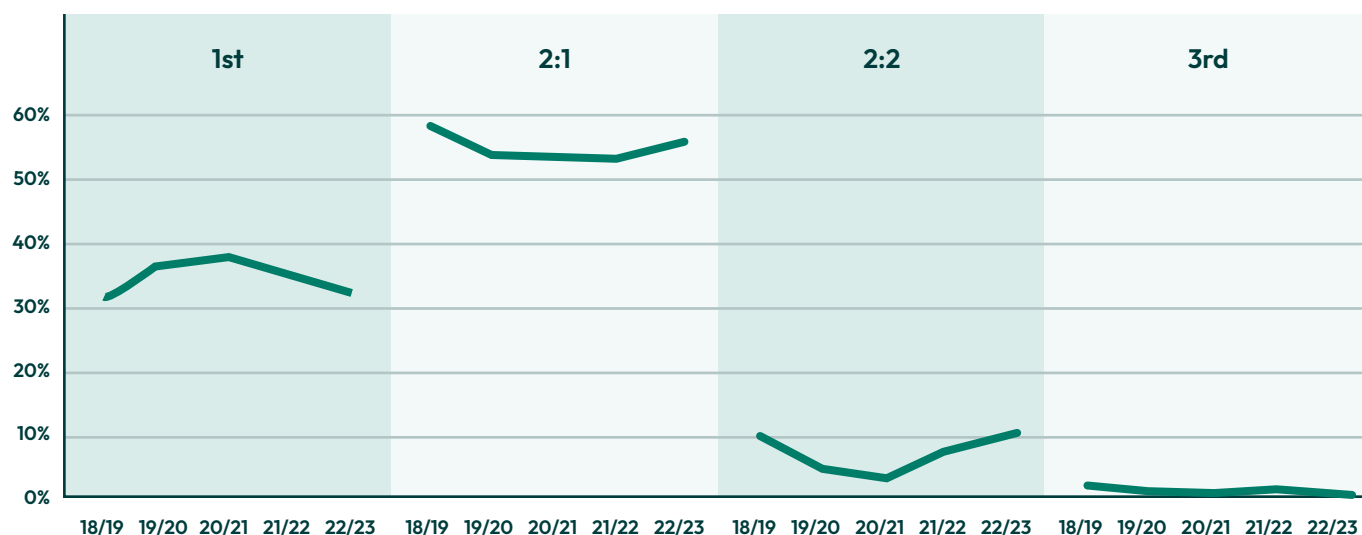
Three out of five of the academic years represented by the data in Figure 1 above were declared Exceptional Years, in accordance with the University's **Exceptional Circumstances Handbook**. These include the two COVID-19 impacted academic years of 2019/20 and 2020/21 and the Industrial Action impacted year of 2022/23. During such years, emergency policies and procedures were adopted to ensure that students could progress and be awarded, whilst maintaining academic standards and the integrity of Exeter Awards.

As a result of the exceptional circumstances, the trend in the proportion of 1st class degrees awarded by the University has fluctuated, with associated changes in the award of 2:1s and in lower class degrees. This can be largely attributed to the changes in teaching,

learning and assessment and the subsequent return to more usual policies and practices. A period of stability is needed before a clearer picture of awarding trends over time can be established and further contributory factors explored.

Following a total increase of 6% in the proportion of 1st class degrees awarded during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted academic years of 2019/20 and 2020/21, a more gradual decline of 4% has been observed over the two subsequent academic years. This has been associated with a 1% increase in 2:1s in 2022/23 and a more sustained increase of 4% in 2:2s between 2020/21 and 2022/23. There has been no change in the award of 3rd class degree during this time period, which has remained at around 1% throughout.

2.2 Comparison with Sector Trends in Undergraduate Degree Classification

This section usually presents the trends illustrated in Figure 1 above, in comparison with the same trends for the following groups within the Higher Education sector:

- The Sector – all undergraduate degree awarding institutions;

- The **Russell Group** – a group of research-intensive Universities, of which the University of Exeter forms part; and

- The Competitor Group – a self-selected group of similar institutions within the sector.

In previous reports this has been done by drawing on cross-sector degree classification data from the **Higher Education Statistics Agency** (HESA) Student Outcomes Data set, as collated and supplied by Jisc (formally the Joint Information Systems Committee, now a not-for-profit member organisation). The data is also used within the University for benchmarking purposes.

Figure 2: University of Exeter Trends in Undergraduate Degree Classifications compared with those for the Higher Education Sector as a whole.

— Exeter — Sector
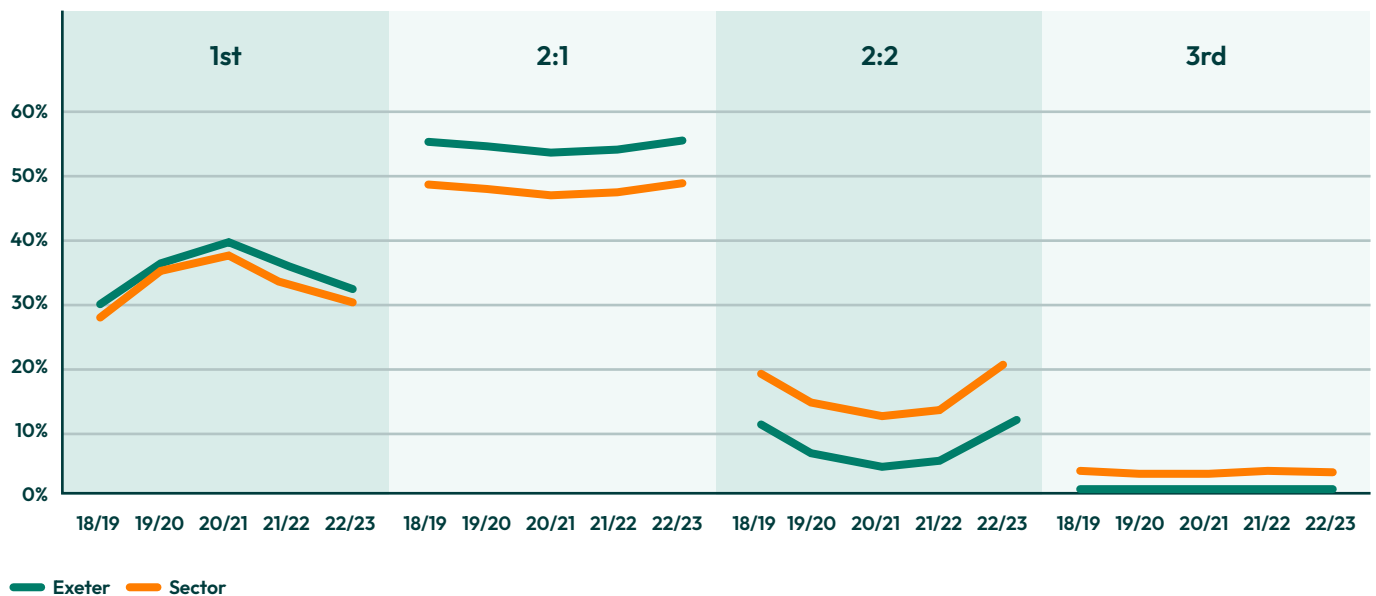
Unfortunately, Jisc has been unable to provide the data for all of the above groups, in timely fashion due to delays, arising from the implementation of HESA's **Data Futures Programme**, in collating and publishing the Student Outcomes Data set for the 2022/23 academic year. Data Futures is a major project transforming the collection, assurance and dissemination of Higher Education data with a range of benefits for stakeholders. The delay has, in turn, led to a delay in the availability of sector degree classification benchmarking data.

Data for the sector as a whole is, however, available and indicates that the University's awarding trends continue to be broadly in line with those for all undergraduate degree awarding institutions.

It should be noted that Russell Group Universities and other higher entry tariff Universities have historically tracked slightly above the sector average for the award of 1st class and 2:1 degrees.

The University will continue to monitor, compare and benchmark its overall degree outcomes, as new more granular sector data becomes available, and make full use of its External Examiner Reports, HESA and Jisc data, and regulatory reports such as the OfS's **Analysis of Degree Classifications Over Time** This will enable it to take steps to guard against grade inflation. A further comparison with sector trends will be presented in the University's Degree Outcomes Statement 2025.

2.3 Degree Classifications by Demographic Groups

This section presents trends in the 1st class degrees awarded by the University to its undergraduate students between 2018/19 and 2022/23, differentiated by selected demographic characteristics that include both UK-domiciled and international students. Figures 2 to 6 below should be viewed in conjunction with Figure 1 above as they also reflect trends for the overall graduate population.

It should be noted that there may be some differences in the data presented below and that shown in the University's **Access and Participation Plan 20/21-24/25** (variation 23/24) and its recently approved and published successor the **Access and Participation Plan 2025/26 to 2028/29** plans utilise data from the OfS's publicly available **Access and Participation Data Dashboard**, together with internal data which cover UK- Domiciled students only.

Figure 3: University of Exeter Proportion of 1st Class Degrees by Domicile
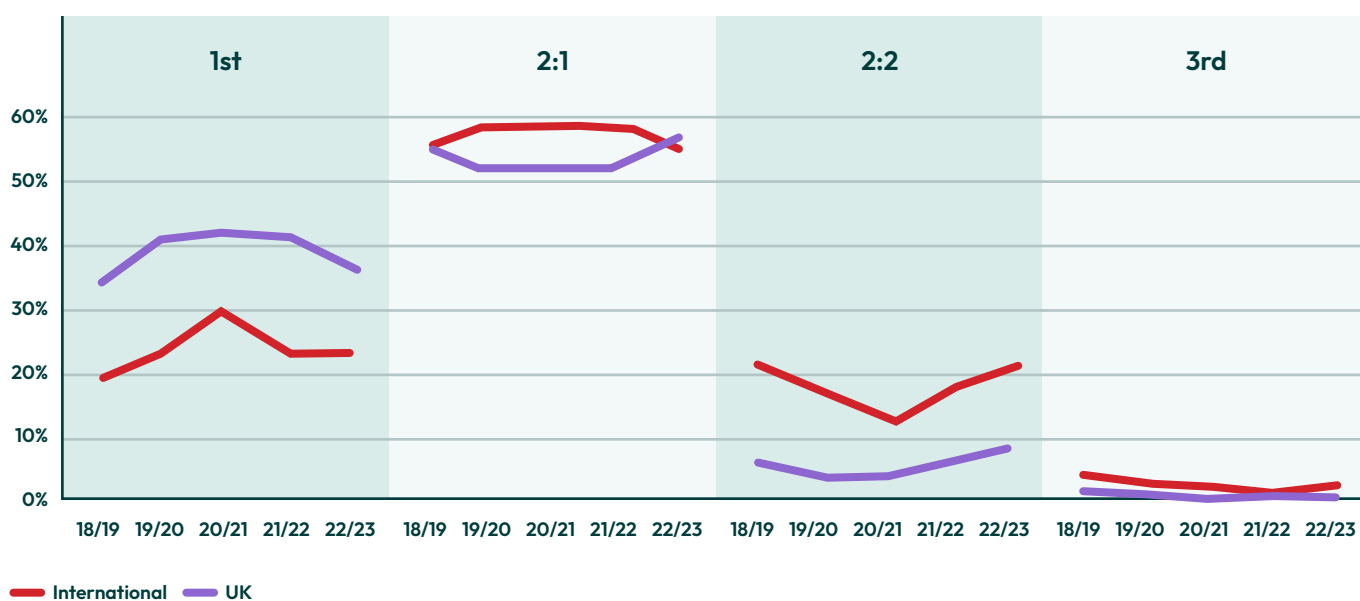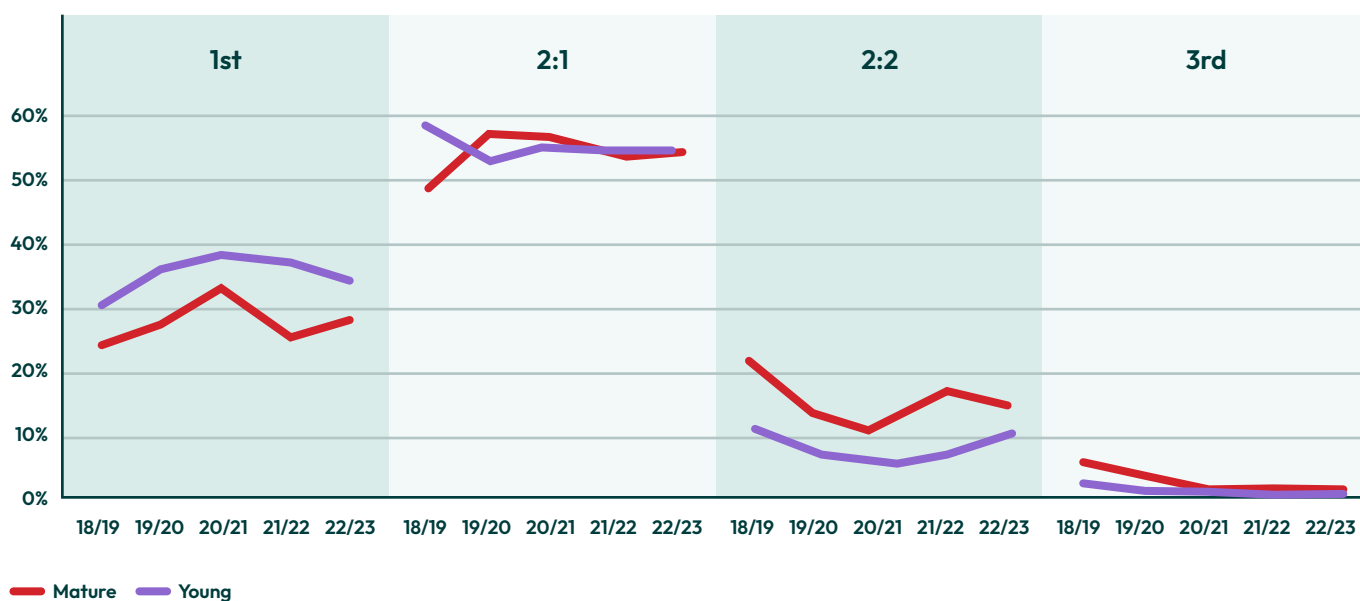

Figure 4: University of Exeter Proportion of 1st Class Degrees by Age Group

Mature – Students who are 21 years or over when they enter Higher Education

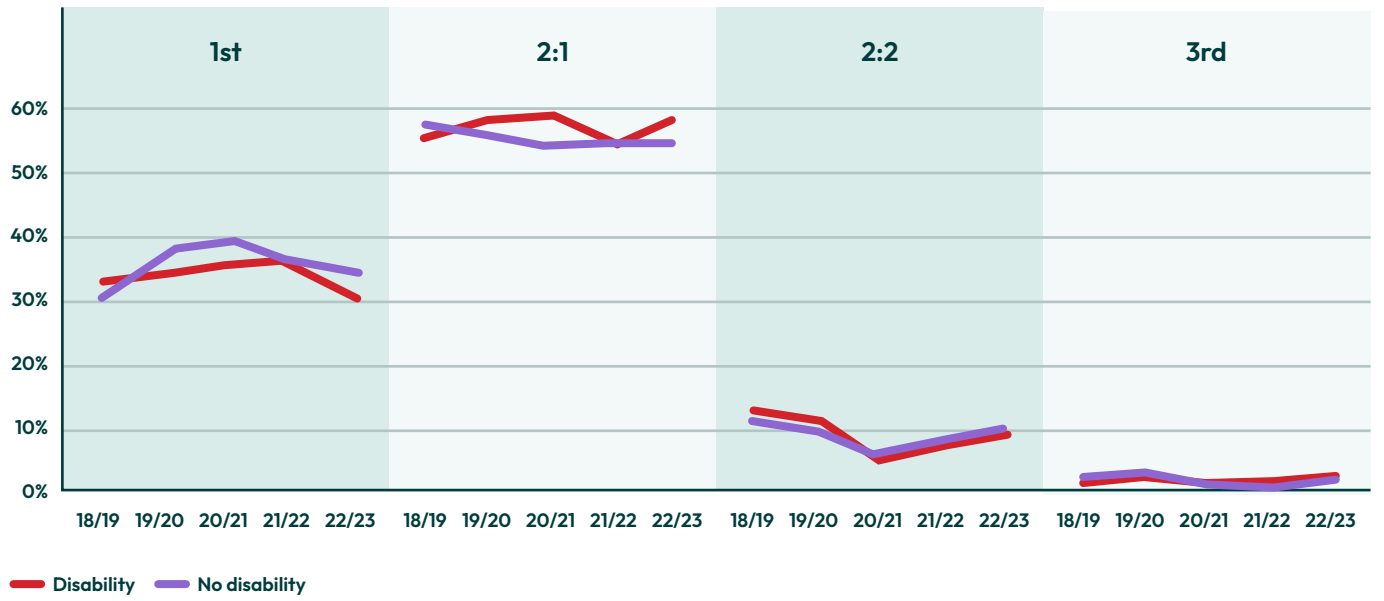**Figure 5: Proportion of 1st Class Degrees by Disability**

Legend: Disability, No disability

Figure 6: Proportion of 1st Class Degrees by Gender
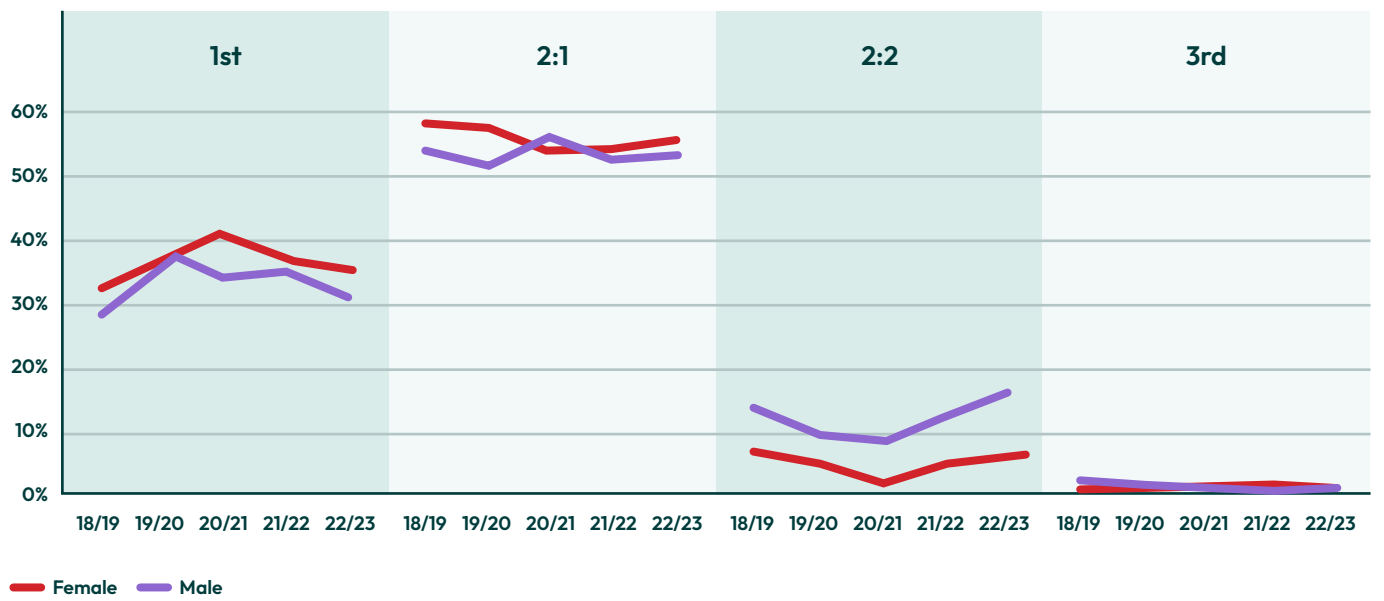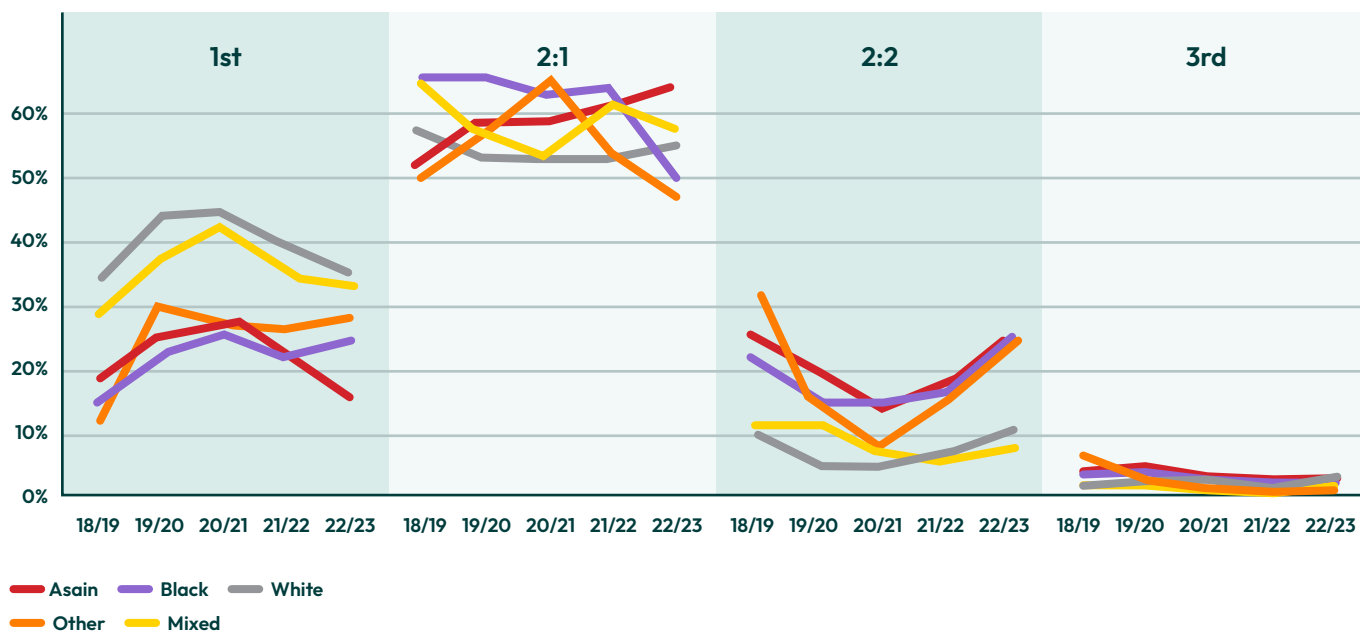

Legend: Female, Male

Figure 7: Proportion of 1st Class Degrees by Ethnicity

The University recognises that, in addition to changes in the proportions of different classifications awarded over time, the awarding gaps that exist between some of its demographic groups of students have also fluctuated and require further investigation and intervention. Awarding gaps are defined by the OfS within its **Access and Participation Glossary** as, '... identified gaps in degree outcomes for underrepresented groups when compared with their peers'. Closing such gaps over time is a cross-sector priority.

Internal and sector studies indicate that a wide variety of factors may contribute to the emergence of such gaps during the student journey and that they are not directly attributable to student attainment on entry. Some of these changes, such as the closing and subsequent reopening of the awarding gap between students who disclose a disability and those that do not (see Figure 5 above) may also have been influenced by the previously reported changes in teaching, learning and assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent return to more usual policies and practices.

The University is committed to addressing the disparities in the degree outcomes of its students, in particular, reducing the 1st class degree awarding gaps between:

- International and UK-domiciled students;
- Students from Asian, Black, Mixed and Other (ABMO) ethnicities and white students;
- Mature and young students; and
- Students with and without a disclosed social or communication disability.

This is, therefore, an area in which the University is continuing to engage in further research, analysis and action at both strategic and operational levels (see Section 7 below for further information).

3. Assessment and Marking Practices

The regulation of standards is set out in the University's **Assessment, Progression and Awarding Handbook.** The University has a robust and rigorous approach to assuring the standardisation of assessment, marking and decision-making on the award of its degrees, confirmed through prior Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Institutional Review and Institutional Audit. These have not changed significantly during the period covered by this statement. Consistency of marking is ensured through best practice quality and standards assurance measures, such as anonymity (wherever possible) and the use of moderation and sampling. External Examiners are appointed in accordance with the **External Examining Handbook** to oversee the standards of assessment on all taught programmes, producing annual reports, which feed into the University's quality and standards review processes.

The University operates a three-tier system of **Assessment, Progression and Awarding Committees** (APACs). Tier One is the Discipline APAC, whose primary responsibility is to safeguard academic standards. Tier Two is the Faculty APAC, whose primary responsibility is to ensure that academic regulations are applied consistently and equitably across Departments within a Faculty. Tier Three is the University APAC, whose primary responsibility is to identify areas where policy clarifications or enhancements are required, consider patterns of degree outcomes and academic standards and make associated strategic recommendations.

To ensure that the University's **Assessment Criteria** meet sector reference points, the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements and other Sector Standards are considered during the approval and review of programmes, together with the competency requirements of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) where appropriate. External Assessors are also appointed during the **Academic Approval** process to ensure that academic standards and the quality of the student academic experience are assured from the outset. In addition, the University supports opportunities for academics to work as External Examiners and Advisors to enhance standardisation within the Higher Education sector.

The procedures governing student academic appeals against assessment, progression or awarding decisions are detailed in the University's **Student Cases Handbook**. Students may also apply for **Mitigation**. This provides a 'safety net' in the event that a student is ill or affected by personal circumstances that potentially preclude them from undertaking an examination or submitting an assignment on time.

4. Academic Governance

The **Statutes** and **Ordinances** of the University of Exeter are the fundamental rules and principles that govern how the University undertakes its learning and teaching. Detailed **Regulations** cover the operation of teaching, examinations and other matters relating to students. The **Council** is the University's governing body, with responsibility for institutional policies and finances, estates and legal matters, including compliance with the quality and standards conditions of registration with the OfS. Academic governance is provided by **Senate** which is responsible for teaching and learning, examinations and research. The high- level work of Council and Senate is supported through various committees including the **Academic Governance, Education and Student Experience Committee.**

The University has a well-established process of annual internal institutional review of its degree classification data, with the Business Intelligence (BI) Team preparing a detailed and extensive internal report on degree classifications over time, up to and including the preceding academic year in collaboration with the Education Policy, Quality and Standards (EPQS) Team (see Section 7 below for further details). The report and a supporting analytical commentary are presented to the Education Board on an annual basis and in other senior academic forums to shape academic strategy and operational interventions. The report underpins the external Degree Outcome Statement which is presented annually to Senate and Council.

It is an expectation of the Quality Council for UK Higher Education that governing bodies or academic senates should incorporate external assurance into their internal reviews of degree classifications and the preparation of their external Degree Outcomes Statements. The University's **Principal External Examiner** was specifically appointed for this purpose and is fully engaged in the review of degree classifications and signs off the Degree Outcomes Statement, prior to publication. With a background and expertise in Social Mobility, Justice and Inequalities in Higher Education, they fulfil a dual role in reviewing degree outcomes from the perspective of degree standards and 'Success for All'. In doing so, they attend meetings of the University APAC and Student Outcomes Steering Group (see Section 7 below for further details).

Arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment delivered through partnership arrangements are outlined in the University's **Academic Partnerships Handbook** and the taught validated and accredited awards that may be delivered in partnership are listed in its **Regulations Governing Academic Programmes.**

5. 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'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 Bachelor's and Integrated Master's Degrees are set out in Section 9.4. The degree algorithms are applied rigorously and consistently by Department APACs and verified by Faculty APACs. Any exceptions, such as Aegrotat Awards made under **Ordinance 16,** must be approved by the Dean for Taught Students at the University APAC.

To ensure that academic standards are upheld, there are consequences for failure in individual assessments and modules, and whilst referrals and repeat study, with and without attendance, 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 Assessment, Progression and Awarding: Taught Programmes Handbook.

6. Teaching Practices and Learning Resources

The University prides itself on its commitment to excellence in all aspects of teaching, learning and assessment and consistently strives to enhance the quality of its teaching and learning. Dedicated teams of professional services experts work across the University's learning community to support academic staff in the development and delivery of teaching excellence for all its students, including within the new Directorate of **Learning Experiences and Innovation** (LXI).

The University's **Quality Review and Enhancement Framework** sets out the process for the annual **Quality Review and Enhancement of Taught Programmes.** This is a multi-layered process starting with the Annual Review of Modules and culminating with the Annual Review of Faculties by the University. There are two elements within this, which focus specifically on teaching excellence and academic standards:

- **Teaching Excellence Action Plans (TEAPs)** have been designed to reflect the strategic importance of teaching excellence, respond to emerging issues and record completed actions, as part of a cyclical process of quality assurance and enhancement; and

- **Teaching Excellence Monitoring Meetings (TEMs)** are the annual University scrutiny meeting with each Department within the Faculties, which ensure that its expectations in relation to teaching and learning are being upheld and that best practice is highlighted and shared.

The University continues to develop its facilities and services to support its educational priorities, its teaching and learning and the academic experience of its students. **Estate Services** oversee the refurbishment of existing, and the provision of new, teaching and learning facilities and study places and spaces for students. This includes adapting such space to new ways of working and studying and contributing to the University's **Carbon Net Zero Target**. There is also considerable ongoing investment in **Library** resources and services for academic staff and students, both physical and online. A new version of the **Exeter Learning Environment** (known as ELE 2), has also been developed. This provides students with enhanced access to digital teaching, learning and assessment materials, activities and tools, as well as online assessment submission and feedback.

The University continues to take an evidenced-based and researched-informed approach to the enhancement of its teaching, learning and assessment practices ensuring that they are designed from the outset to have a positive impact on the learning experience and academic outcomes of its students. Monitoring and evaluation is also built into every stage of development and many improvements are co-created with, and reviewed by students through a well-established system of **Academic Representation** and close partnership working with the University of Exeter **Students' Guild** (Exeter campuses) and the Falmouth and Exeter **Students' Union** (Cornwall campuses).

7. Identifying Good Practice and Actions

7.1 Commitment to Success for All

The University's **Education Strategy 2019-2025** makes a commitment to '...delivering an education and student experience of the highest international quality, and to supporting all of its students to realise their potential'. This is also captured in its **Access and Participation Plan 20/21-24/25** (variation 23/24) for UK-domiciled students only and in the University's **Strategy 2030**.

One of the Education Strategy's priorities is to, 'enhance our undergraduate offer in: the quality of learning, teaching, student support and student outcomes'. The strategy also defines as a characteristic of excellence in education, 'Success for all our students', underpinned by a pledge to:

- Strive to eliminate gaps in access, awarding and progression to employment seen between groups defined by socio-economic (dis)advantage, ethnicity, age, disability, gender and nationality.

The University's leadership and governance arrangements for the delivery of this pledge are overseen by the **Success for All Strategy Group**, chaired by the Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience). The Strategy Group is supported by a series of working groups, each addressing a different aspect of the student lifecycle, including:

- Access;
- Transition and Induction;
- Success and Inclusive Education; and
- Progression.

Additional thematic working groups focus in on areas requiring actions and interventions for specific student groups, such as:

- International student experience;
- Underrepresented students; and
- Diversity and inclusion in postgraduate study.

Within the framework provided by the Success for All Governance Structure, the University of Exeter has adopted and is now delivering a three-strand approach to addressing awarding gaps between students from different demographic groups. This approach recognises the evidence-informed value of inclusive education, successful transitions and targeted interventions.

1. Systemic promotion and embedding of inclusive education practice

- Implementing a **Transformative Education Framework** with inclusive education, racial and social justice and sustainability as core strands.

- Utilising an on-line Education Toolkit which provides a wealth of information, tools and resources for academic staff to help them adopt inclusive approaches within their teaching and assessment practices.

- Using the Department-level TEAPs and TEMs, which form part of the **Quality Review and Enhancement Framework**, in tandem with Faculty Success for All Groups, to provide a vehicle for addressing awarding gaps at Department level.

2. Delivery of best practice approaches to induction and transition

- Implementing a structured transition process, based on best practice principles, starting pre¬arrival, moving through the initial induction period and extending throughout students' first term and beyond.

- Maintaining Transition and Induction Coordinator roles in each Faculty to support and share structured and consistent approaches to effective induction and transition across the University.

- Delivering a suite of on-line, Faculty-level pre¬arrival courses. These provide students with an opportunity to introduce themselves and connect with their peers.

- Delivery of an **Enhanced Induction Programme** to provide extra support, signposting and access to peer networks to under-represented students to ensure they have the best possible start to their university studies.

3. Enhanced and targeted support for students, particularly those within groups most likely to experience gaps in outcomes

- Providing leadership via the Associate Dean for Taught Students (Racial Equality and Inclusion) and a network of Inclusion Academic Leads at Department-level to provide support for students who may experience racism or discrimination during the course of their studies.

- Continuing to provide a **Peer Mentors** scheme and using peer engagement to specifically support students from widening participation backgrounds, such as those disclosing physical or hidden disabilities, thereby providing personalised support.

- Prioritising the support provided by the **Study Zone**, which offers individualised academic skills development, for students from widening participation backgrounds and those groups most likely to experience degree awarding gaps.

- Enhancing the cross-university approach to monitoring and evaluating these schemes to better understand 'what works'.

The University's approach to access and participation has been the subject of detailed review, evaluation and consultation during the 2023/24 academic year. This has informed the preparation of the University's **Access and Participation Plan 2025/26 to 2028/29** as approved by the Director for Fair Access and Participation of the OfS . The plan details the intervention strategies and activities that the University will introduce to address identified risks to equality of opportunity and how it will measure and evaluate their impact over time. The plan also includes new targets and interventions in relation to awarding gaps for UK-domiciled students and a further update will be provided in the Degree Outcomes Statement 2025.

In addition to work undertaken under the banners of 'Success for All' and the Access and Participation Plan, students, researchers, academics and professional services staff are also continuing to work collaboratively to create an inclusive learning environment, within which all can thrive and succeed. This includes that undertaken by the sector-leading **Centre for Social Mobility**, the innovative **Education Incubator**, together with the student focused priorities of the **Wellbeing, Inclusion and Culture Committee (WICC)** co-chaired by the Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (People and Culture) and the Executive Divisional Director of Human Resources.

7.2 Commitment to Maintaining the Integrity of Exeter Degrees

As outlined in Sections 3, 4 and 5 of this Statement, the University pursues a robust and rigorous approach to assuring the standardisation of its awards over time as set out in its Assessment, Progression and Awarding: Taught Programmes Handbook. **Chapter 13** on the Review and Publication of Degree Outcomes is an integral part of this approach and provides a formal structure for both the internal review of degree classifications and the external publication of this Statement.

Data and information remain critical to the understanding and maintenance of degree standards, as well as action to eliminate degree awarding gaps. With specific reference to the former, the University's Business Intelligence Team and Education Policy, Quality and Standards Team continue to collaborate to ensure that curated reports and live dashboards are up to date and disseminated in a timely manner across the academic year to those that need it, including Module Convenors, Programme Directors, External Examiners and Senior Education Leaders.

Examples of the University's annual and curated reports and live dashboards include the following:

Degree Classification Summary Reports:

These present Institutional and Faculty data across five academic years highlighting trends in both undergraduate 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, in relation to both academic standards and 'Success for All'. The associated review and reporting process has now been extended to cover postgraduate taught programmes.

Degree Outcomes Benchmarking Report

This utilises HESA /Jisc degree classifications data to present comparisons of the University undergraduate degree classifications with the Russell Group, the University's self-selected Competitor Group and the sector as a whole. It can be viewed at Institution, Faculty and cognate discipline levels. By informing dialogues about academic standards, the data supports decision-making on assessment design, marking practices, moderation and calibration.

Module Results Reports:

These present historic module data compared to current module data to support decision-making at Department-level APACs. Academic staff and External Examiners will consider whether any **Scaling** of module marks should be undertaken, if the performance of a cohort of students shows a significant deviation when compared to previous academic years. Data is considered alongside other contextual factors, such as exceptional circumstances affecting all students in the cohort.

These reports and dashboards support an annual cycle of informed decision-making and action on degree standards at operational and strategic levels. Business Intelligence also provide support, such as through workshops and one to one advice, to assist both academic and professional services staff in accessing, interpreting and making effective use of the data and information to assure the academic integrity of awards for taught programmes.

7.3 Commitment to Research and Analysis

Between 2020/21 and 2022/23 the University's Degree Outcomes Steering Group, chaired by the Dean for Taught Students, played a pivotal role in 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. The work that the Steering Group undertook has now been integrated into the annual cycle of internal review of degree classifications and external publication of this statement, as set out in **Chapter 13** of the Assessment, Progression and Awarding: Taught Programmes Handbook, and is supported by the Business Intelligence and Education Policy, Quality and Standards teams.

The University, therefore, took the decision in 2023/24 to expand the remit of the group to become the Student Outcomes Steering Group, focusing on student continuation, completion and progression, as defined by the OfS's **Student Outcome and Experience Measures**, as well as degree outcomes data. The group continues to draw on both academic and professional services expertise and engage with student representatives. It aims to build on the firm foundations laid, and lessons learned, in relation to degree outcomes and to commission, disseminate and enhance accessibility and understanding of a wider range of student outcomes data and analyses. It will also maintain the role of highlighting areas for action by Governance Bodies and Stakeholders across the University.

The University is, by its nature, a learning institution, in which research and education are inextricably linked and teaching, learning and assessment, as well as academic and pastoral support, is consistently and constantly informed by internal and external research and best practice. The following case study provides an excellent example of how a methodology applied by the Faculty of Environment, Science and Economy to evaluate the impact on student outcomes of the **2019/20 No Detriment Policy implemented at the University of Exeter in Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic** has been further developed to deliver new, annual, Department-level insights on the emergence of awarding gaps during the student journey.

Case Study: The Quartile Gap Methodology

Whilst awarding gaps are a useful big picture metric they only tell us about the student experience after a student has completed and been awarded their degree. In order to put in place effective interventions, we need to understand the experience and attainment gaps emerging whilst they are still studying with us. There is also a growing volume of evidence that the transition into higher education is one of the key points where gaps in experience and outcomes emerge, therefore, we need to understand attainment gaps as early as possible. Consideration of the Good Honours or 1st class awarding gap is also open to statistical manipulation. This was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic affected years where an apparent narrowing of the Good Honours gap was seen as more Good Honours degrees were awarded. This gap has opened up again as fewer Good Honours degrees are awarded. The narrowing of the gap may thus have been a statistical artefact rather than a real effect.

In order to better understand both the emergence and persistence of such gaps, and indeed gaps across the entire grade range we have developed our 'Quartile Gap' methodology. This applies a Biased Coin Model to consider the distribution of students from different demographic groups in each grade quartile. This shows that some groups of students are significantly more likely to obtain grades in the lowest quartile of student attainment than other groups and similarly that some demographic groups are over-represented in our highest attainment quartile. We can apply this approach at a cohort, stage or even module level to see where gaps emerge, highlight areas of particular challenge or areas of best practice in addressing gaps. We regularly share this analysis with Departments and work collaboratively to identify areas for development, both in terms of interventions to address gaps and further data analysis which may help support work in Departments and further policy development. This work has been shared with the sector through the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) **Mapping the Awarding Gap** resource.