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UNIVERSITY OF EXETER DEGREE OUTCOMES STATEMENT 2022: SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT

RESPONSE TO THE UNIVERSITIES UK AND GUILD HE COMMITMENTS ON PROTECTING DEGREE STANDARDS (JULY 2O22)

1.   Introduction

The University of Exeter published its first Degree Outcomes Statement in December 2020 and full updates to this in July 2021 and July 2022. The Degree Outcomes Statements aim to meet the expectations of the UK Standing Committee on Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) and 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. The statements, therefore, highlight both degree awarding trends and degree awarding gaps between different demographic groups of students, and the University's respective responses.

The purpose of this Supplemental Report is to present prospective and current undergraduate students, academic partners, stakeholders and other interested parties with additional information on how the University is responding to new commitments made by Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE in 'After the pandemic: our commitment to degree classifications'. The commitments aim to address the growth in 1st or Upper 2nd class degrees (collectively referred to as 'Good Honours Degrees') that occurred during the COVID-19 impacted academic years of 2019-20 and 2020-21. Furthermore, in line with measures being introduced for GCSE and A-Levels, in England and Wales, it seeks to return levels of such awards to pre-pandemic levels as soon as possible.

During this period the University, along with many other Universities and College, introduced emergency policies to ensure that students were not unfairly disadvantaged by the prevailing conditions, including national lockdowns and the pivot to remote teaching, learning and assessment. The policies, which included the University of Exeter's No Detriment Policy (2019-20) and No Disadvantage Guarantee (2020-21), were necessary, appropriate and proportionate at the time and all students who received their degrees from Exeter during this period should be quite rightly proud of their achievements, as the University is of them.

The emergency of the Higher Education sector from the COVID-19 pandemic, presents an opportunity to review teaching, learning and assessment policies and practices alongside outcomes for all students. UUK and GuildHE, speaking on behalf of their members, have, therefore, stated that:

> *"As a sector, we commit to reviewing our classification levels against the pre-pandemic progress that had seen trends stabilising. Our members will work to return to these levels as soon as possible."*

The full commitment is set out in Section 2 below and Section 3 provides an overview of the Universities response to the individual expectations. It should be noted that the University has already addressed a number of these within its full Degree Outcomes Statements and so this Supplemental Report should be read in conjunction with these, in particular those published in 2021 and 2022.

2.   **The New Commitment**

Universities UK

Along with our members, we commit to the following actions:

1.Our members in England will report to their governing bodies and then publish revised degree outcomes statements by the end of 2022 that include:

- a review of progress against actions set out in degree outcome statements of 2020 and 2021;
- a commitment to restart any outstanding actions paused during the pandemic with revised timelines, where they are still relevant;
- an assessment of pandemic-related changes and the impact on degree classification, using pre-pandemic data (relating to 2018–19) as an appropriate benchmark and setting out how they will return to pre-pandemic levels by 2022–23;
- a commitment to further actions to address any areas where there is unexplained inflation; and
- an explanation of how sector-supported principles on degree algorithms and external examiners are being followed.

2. UUK and GuildHE will publish a list of the revised degree outcomes statements on the UUK website.

3. In January 2023, UUK and GuildHE will publish an annual review of wider progress on the UKSCQA statement of intent on degree classification. This will include committing to further sector-led action where there are common challenges, or progress is stalling.

4. UUK and GuildHE will work with the Committee for University Chairs (CUC) to support governing bodies to strengthen their understanding and scrutiny of degree classification trends and related activities.

3.   The University's Response

3.1   Review of progress against actions set out in degree outcome statements of 2020 and 2021

The University has established a robust annual cycle for the internal review and external publication of its degree outcomes. This is now embedded in Section 13 of the Assessment, Progression and Awarding: Taught Programmes Handbook of its Teaching Quality Assurance (TQA) Manual. This cycle is overseen by the Degree Outcomes Steering Group, a formally constituted sub-committee of the University's Education Board (formerly known as Board of the Faculty of Taught Programmes), which commissions, disseminates, and enhances the accessibility and understanding of, new degree outcomes data and analyses. It also highlights areas for action by Governance Bodies and Stakeholders across the University.

Externality is provided to both the review of degree outcomes and the content of the Degree Outcomes Statement by the University's Principal External Examiner. They are fully engaged with the Degree Outcomes Steering Group and attend the University Assessment Progression and Awarding Committee (UAPAC). They fulfil a dual role in reviewing degree outcomes from the perspective of both degree standards and widening participation.

The review process encompasses the identification of good practice and actions, as included within the University's Degree Outcomes Statements, with a focus on those which contribute to delivering its strategic commitments to:
- Ensuring 'Success for All';
- Maintaining the integrity of University of Exeter degrees; and
- Further research and analysis.

Sections 7.1 to 7.3 of the University's Degree Outcomes Statement 2022 provide detailed updates on progress and developments in all three areas.

3.2   Commitment to restart any outstanding actions paused during the pandemic with revised timelines, where they are still relevant

The Degree Outcomes Steering Group was established at the start of the 2020-21 academic year, under the Chair of the now Dean for Taught Students, and has met regularly and worked continuously since. The work of the Degree Outcomes Steering Group was, however, impacted to some extent by the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic into the 2020-21 academic year and the diversion of resources, including those of Business Intelligence (BI) and the Quality and Standards Team (QST), to the University's on-going response.

Accordingly, there was a need to reprioritise some work, specifically that relating to the commissioning of new degree outcomes datasets to inform decision-making. However, considerable progress was subsequently made during the 2021-22 academic year, including the following action that have contributed to ensuring the integrity of University of Exeter degrees:

- Supporting the appointment and overseeing the induction of the new Principal External Examiner;
- Gaining approval for, and making amendments to the Assessment, Progression and Awarding: Taught Programmes Handbook to formalise the annual internal review and external publication of degree outcomes;
- Evaluating the impact of elements of the No Disadvantage Guarantee 2020-21 on degree outcomes, using available data and information;
- Preparing and presenting the Undergraduate Degree Classifications Summary 2020-21 and accompanying overview and next steps to the Education Board and Senate;
- Preparing and presenting a new Degree Outcomes Benchmarking Report to Senate to meet a specific request from the Chair and a commitment in the Degree Outcomes Statements 2020 and 2021;
- Enhancing communication and awareness raising on the availability of degree outcomes datasets and providing advice and support on their interpretation and use as needed; and
- Consulting on, preparing, seeking approval for and publishing the University's Degree Outcomes Statement 2022.

3.3   <u>Assessment of pandemic-related changes and the impact on degree classification, using pre-pandemic data (relating to 2018–19) as an appropriate benchmark and setting out how they will return to pre-pandemic levels by 2022–23</u>

The University saw a 4 percentage points (ppt) increase in 'Good Honours Degrees' in 2019-20 and a further 2ppt increase was observed in 2020-21. This saw the overall award of 'Good Honours Degrees' grow from a 2018-19 baseline of 87% to 93% over the course of these two COVID-19 impacted academic years. This trend was mirrored across the Higher Education sector. Commentary concerning sector wide trends has attributed these changes to the emergency policies put in place to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching, learning and assessment and on student wellbeing. Nevertheless, the University has undertaken analysis to explore the contributions of both emergency policy interventions and changes in assessment (especially to open-book online examination).

The University has reviewed the impact of its No Detriment Policy and No Disadvantage Guarantee on degree outcomes. A summary of the findings can be found in the in the Degree Outcomes Statement 2021 and Degree Outcomes Statement 2022 respectively. A more detailed <u>Report into the 2019/20 No Detriment Policy implemented at the University of Exeter in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic</u> was also published as a Supplemental Report in 2021.

The Supplemental Report concluded that:

> **"What is clear is that the No Detriment Policy (NDP) did not represent a relaxation of academic standards causing significant increases in the proportion of 'good honours degrees'. The vast majority of students obtained a degree classification from marks, which included a significant number of examinations sat at the height of the national lockdown. NDP acted, as intended, as a 'safety net' for a small number of students who were unable to perform at a level consistent with their previous attainment. The No Detriment Policy was also not solely responsible for the observed reduction in awarding gaps. It is more likely that other changes to the type and mode of assessment had a greater impact on student attainment and thus their degree classification."**

The University acknowledges, however, that during the COVID-19 pandemic there were a wider range of variables, introduced by changes to teaching, learning and assessment, as well as support for students' health and wellbeing, which may have impacted on degree outcomes.

The University has already commenced its review of its provisional 2021-22 degree outcomes data. During this period, certain elements of its previous emergency policies were maintained for those students who had completed credit-bearing modules during the COVID-19 impacted academic years, the marks from which contributed to their final degree classification. However, provisional data would appear to support the conclusions of the University's previous analysis in that change in the modes and methods of assessment were more influential on degree outcomes than the specific 'safety net' measures put in place.

With the return to more traditional, closed-book, invigilated on-campus examinations and assessments across a range of academic disciplines, in particular those accredited by Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs), the proportion of 'Good Honours Degrees' awarded by the University has already fallen by 3ppt, to 90% between 2020-21 and 2021-22. This is 50% of the reduction that would be required to return to the 2018-19 baseline, in line with the UUK and Guild HE expectation. Please see Figure 1 below for an illustration of this trend.
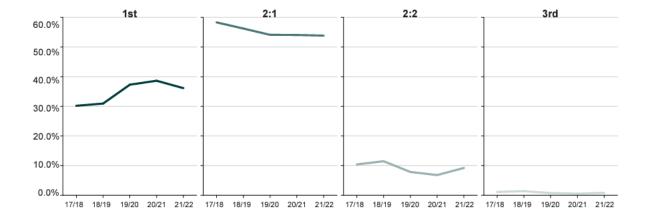
Figure 1: University of Exeter Degree Classification Trends (2017-28 to 2021-22)

Further analyses are required to fully understand the factors that have influenced both the increase and now reduction in the award of 'Good Honours Degrees' over the past three academic years. Additional qualitative and quantitative data and information will be gathered to facilitate this, which will provide a focus for the continuing work of the Degree Outcomes Steering Group during 2022-23. Such analyses will also support the University's work in reviewing and developing its future assessment strategies, including learning from recent COVID-19 pandemic driven innovations, as part of its 'Assessment Reimagined' Project.

3.4   Commitment to continue to analyse year-to-year variation and trends in awarding patterns to ensure the academic integrity and enduring value of University of Exeter Awards

The University is committed to ensuring the academic integrity and enduring value of Exeter degrees and that the knowledge, skills and professional competencies its graduates attain are in line with the Higher Education sector's recognised standards.

The Degree Outcomes Steering Group, in association with the University's Education and Student Experience Senior Leadership Team and Principal External Examiner, have reviewed the Office for Students' (OfS) Analysis of Degree Classifications over Time (2010-11 to 2020-21), and the accompanying data and statistical modelling methodology, with a particular focus on that pertaining to the University of Exeter itself.

The data confirms, as also shown in Figure 1 above, that the University saw an increase in the award of 'Good Honours Degrees', most notably 1st class degrees, during the COVID-19 impacted academic years. As demonstrated above, this has been subject to detailed analysis with respect to policy interventions made during this period. Monitoring changes in awarding patterns over time, and responding where necessary, is also a core objective of the Degree Outcomes Steering Group.

The University does not concur that our awarding patterns evidence 'unexplained grade inflation'. The University is concerned that the statistical modelling employed by the OfS relies heavily on student characteristics and, especially, on pre-University attainment. Our analysis of degree performance within our cohorts has demonstrated that pre-University attainment is a poor predictor of University performance and academic outcomes. Therefore, the OfS definition of awarding patterns that exceed their model outputs as 'unexplained grade inflation' is not considered robust. Nevertheless, the University will build on the OfS methodology and develop tools for analysing awarding patterns that address the multiplicity of factors that can influence students' final degree outcomes.

During the 2021/22 academic year, for example, the University developed a Degree Outcomes Benchmarking Report. This utilises Higher Education Statistics Agency (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. Academic colleagues across the Faculties and Departments are now encouraged to access and consider the data and information provided in the Benchmarking Report. This will help to inform dialogues about academic standards at programme, Department and Faculty level and feed into reviews of assessment design, marking practices and moderation.

Opportunities for marking calibration activity between Departments within the same and different Faculties, or between related subjects and programmes at different institutions will also be explored. Raising awareness of available data and how it can be interpreted and used is seen as critical. The University is, therefore, developing communication plans and developmental events for academic colleagues, which will be introduced during the 2022-23 academic year, to support them in making effective use of the available data and analyses to assure academic standards.

In addition, the data and information provided by the Benchmarking Report and other degree outcomes reports will be shared with the University's programme-level 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 programmes and subjects elsewhere in the sector, beyond their own institution or others they have experienced in an External Examining capacity.

3.5   An explanation of how sector-supported principles on degree algorithms and external examiners are being followed

The University endorses, and will seek to align its policies and procedures, with the principles set out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), UUK and GuildHE in their 2020 publication Principles for Effective Degree Algorithm Design.

The principles have been reviewed by the Degree Outcomes Steering Group and whilst the University is confident that its current algorithm for determining the classification of degrees and other Higher Education awards meet these requirements, it is committed to undertake further reviews when needed. For example, it would schedule a review to assure itself that any policy changes had not had an adverse effect on either the integrity of Exeter degrees, or on its strategic commitment to ensuring success for all its students.

An overview of the University's degree algorithms can be found in Section 5 of its Degree Outcomes Statement 2022 and full details in Section 9 of the Assessment, Progression and Awarding: Taught Programmes Handbook of its TQA Manual.

In addition, the University endorses, and will seek to align its policies and procedures, with the principles set out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), UUK and GuildHE in their 2022 publication **External Examining Principles**. During the 2022-23 academic year, the University, with the support of the Degree Outcomes Steering Group, will be focusing in particular on:

- **Principle 1: Protect standards and ensure comparability and consistency** - by ensuring that Programme External Examiners and the Principal External Examiner have the institutional data and information they need to advise and, where necessary, challenge the University on how its students are achieving the required sector-recognised academic standards; and
- **Principle 7: Provide adequate training to enable External Examiners to fulfil their role** - by conducting a review of all communications, information, induction and development opportunities provided, and where needed, introducing new approaches and support to ensure that External Examiners are familiar with the University's policies, process and practices.

4.0   Publication and Review

The University supports UUK and GuildHE's proposals to raise the profile of Degree Outcomes Statements through publication on their website, and thereby the work that goes into annually reviewing and acting on the data and information that they present.

It also welcomes further sector-led review and dissemination of good practice in relation to degree classifications and outcomes. The University is, by its nature, a learning institution, in which research and education are inextricably linked and teaching, learning and assessment are consistently and constantly informed by internal and external research and the sharing of best practice.

The University will publish a further, fully updated version of its Degree Outcomes Statement by 31st July 2023. This will contain a more detailed review and analysis of its 2021-22 degree outcomes data. Each version of the University's Degree Outcomes Statement is subject to the scrutiny and approval of the University's governing body, the Council, which is kept fully informed of degree classification and outcomes trends and activities.