

NTU Degree Outcomes Statement

September 2020

1. Introduction

The purpose of this statement is to describe Nottingham Trent University's (NTU) alignment with 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. It provides an overview of our work to enhance our quality assurance and regulatory frameworks to safeguard academic standards and the value of our qualifications. Since 2012 NTU has undertaken significant review and enhancement of assessment practice; the grading scale; the degree algorithm; and the associated assessment regulations. In the early stages, this work was focused on (a) ensuring the full range of grades were being used to assess student performance and (b) providing better quality of feedback to students on their assessment attempts. In more recent years, the focus has been more widely about fairness for students in assessment – concentrating on the grading scale and the degree algorithm. The first cohort to be impacted by these latter changes graduated in 2018/19.

This statement presents the outcomes of this work and articulates the rationale for the changes that the University has implemented. **All these changes make an explicit contribution to the ongoing validity of the NTU award and protect the value of the NTU degree.**

The statement has been prepared by the Centre for Academic Development and Quality and was considered by Academic Board on 23 September 2020 and by the Board of Governors on 24th November 2020.

2. Institutional degree classification profile

NTU's degree classification profile over the last five years is presented in Table 1 below.

Over the last two years we have made adjustments to NTU's grade-based assessment framework in several ways, set out in sections 3 - 5 below, which are together a specific and principled response to concerns about *artefactual grade improvement* in the sector. *Artefactual grade improvement* can come about as a result of several factors, including inappropriate grading of student performance by markers and the complexities of aggregating judgements of performance, and in particular the potentially inflationary effects of the 70-100 first class range.

The first cohort to be awarded under the fully revised framework were awarded their degrees in 2018/19. The fall in first class degrees awarded in that year is a result of the efforts made to reduce impact of artefactual grade improvement within the NTU system.

	2014/15		2015/16		2016/17		2017/18		2018/19	
	No. students	%								
1st	1074	21.6%	1149	21.5%	1275	21.8%	1509	25.0%	1058	17.5%
2.1	2458	49.5%	2565	48.1%	2917	49.9%	2961	49.0%	3134	51.9%
<i>Combined 1st / 2.1</i>	3532	71.1%	3714	69.6%	4192	71.7%	4470	74.0%	4192	69.4%
2.2	1269	25.5%	1393	26.1%	1427	24.4%	1378	22.8%	1601	26.5%
3rd	167	3.4%	226	4.2%	227	3.9%	196	3.2%	245	4.1%
<i>Total</i>	4968	100%	5333	100%	5846	100%	6044	100%	6038	100%

Table 1: NTU degree classifications 2014/15 – 2018/19. All FHEQ Level 6.

3. Assessment and Marking Practices at NTU

3.1 NTU grading framework

NTU have used a grade-based approach to assessment since 2012. Full details can be found in the [NTU Quality Handbook](#).

In grade-based assessment (GBA), a student's work is assigned a single grade (e.g. High 2.1). The grade awarded is based on comparing the qualities of the work produced against written descriptors (or grading standards) for a number of criteria. This approach can be contrasted with a more traditional approach where an assessor assigns directly a percentage mark, (e.g., 56% or 61%) for a piece of work.

Grading schemes encourage the full use of the associated grading range when compared to the direct allocation of a percentage mark. The approach better rewards intellectual merit and achievement and ensures excellence in student's work is properly rewarded, whilst ensuring poorer quality work also receives the appropriate grade.

The move to a grade-based approach to assessment has meant that criterion-based decisions are enshrined in marking practice through, for example:

- explicit articulation of assessment criteria mapped to learning outcomes;
- the use of a grading matrix (or grid) which shows the relation between the criteria being assessed and the module learning outcomes provided to students as part of the assessment brief;
- an expectation that students receive clear feedback on the extent to which they have achieved against criteria/outcomes, articulated on the same grading matrix.

GBA provides a number of other benefits including: focusing assessment design on learning outcomes; ensuring consistency in assessment decisions; clarifying students' understanding of degree-level performance; supporting transparency of assessment decisions; enhancing the effectiveness of feedback. Because of the significant work that has taken place at NTU in this area over the last eight years, we are confident that these factors make a positive contribution to the ongoing value of NTU awards.

3.2 Ensuring standards

Academic approval at NTU, including for courses that are provisioned in collaboration with another institution or organisation, requires that standards are set for courses which align to the appropriate level within the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and take into account any specific award characteristics and QAA Subject Benchmark Statements where relevant. External expertise (both academic and non-academic) provides assurance that standards being set are in line with sector and employer expectations.

All courses have at least one external examiner and a Board of Examiners. Included in the responsibilities of the external examiner is the requirement that they assess whether the standards set for the course are appropriate for its awards by reference to national subject benchmarks, the national qualification framework and the course specification. They are also required to make a judgement on the comparability of the standards of the course with those of similar courses in the sector.

For collaborative provision, further assurances are afforded through the responsibility of NTU colleagues in dedicated liaison roles. Annual reports which comment on the fairness and rigour of the assessment process at partners, and on the appropriateness of student outcomes feed into the University's annual monitoring framework.

Assessment tasks are moderated by both internal and external peers. Where the assessment contributes to the classification of the final award, this moderation is carried out by the external examiner.

3.3 Ensuring shared understandings

Key to ensuring standards is a shared understanding among stakeholders of those standards and how they are ensured. Students, academic staff and external colleagues are fully briefed of NTU's expectations around assessment and awards. This includes, but is not limited to:

- invitations to all examiners to an External Examiner induction where the NTU grading framework is discussed;
- staff development with colleagues in Academic Liaison and Collaborative Academic Lead roles, for collaborative provision;
- School-based events to support colleagues who are designing and delivering assessment at our collaborative partners;
- an assessment focus within the postgraduate qualification which all NTU staff new to teaching are required to complete;

- a newly developed assessment module which is compulsory for all staff with a learning and teaching responsibility who are not eligible to do the full postgraduate qualification;
- an Assessment Steering Group, chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, reporting to Academic Board, which led the University's communications around the changes made to the degree algorithm (2018/19);
- a set of online guidance for staff and, separately for students, on the rationale behind the changes to the assessment framework.

4. Academic governance

NTU's governance structures provide assurance that students are able to meet, and to surpass, threshold academic standards by defining these standards when courses are approved, by monitoring the outcomes of students as they progress through the course and by reviewing the final classifications awarded.

Academic Board has ultimate responsibility for the standards of the NTU award. The annual quality assurance cycle ensures that evidence about standard setting at course approval, course review, and examination boards is considered by the various committees of Academic Board. This includes outcomes from quality management processes which ensure the standards awards delivered through our partnership arrangements. On a scheduled basis, the Board of Governors receives thematic papers which set out the current state-of-play with respect to standards and quality.

5. Grading scale, calculations and the NTU degree algorithm

The changes since 2012 to the NTU grading scale and degree algorithm are outlined below. These align directly to the recently published 'Principles for effective degree algorithm design' (UUK, July 2020). They are published in the University's [Common Assessment Regulations](#).

5.1 Grading scale

We have shifted to a 'linear' system of numbers that represent each grade (0-16, instead of 0-100). The linear scale is part of our specific and principled response to artefactual grade improvement, because in the 0-100 (non-linear) system some students benefit from the artefactual inflationary effects of the traditional '70-100' first class range. The linear scale explicitly ensures all of our students have the same opportunities to gain from improvements in their work.

5.2 Degree algorithm

We have enhanced the rigour of the algorithm which is used to calculate student awards. In essence, a student is awarded a first if they have performed at a first-class standard on the majority of their modules. This is a demonstrably valid way of determining the awards we make to students.

Final classification of the award is determined by the **better** of either:

- (a) the weighted arithmetic mean of level 5 and level 6 modules, or where level 5 is not specified as contributing to the final award, the weighted arithmetic mean of level 6 modules **or**

- (b) the majority grade of level 5 (where level 5 is specified as contributing to the final award) and level 6 modules, where the majority grade is calculated on the basis of more than half of the credits which contribute to the award achieving a particular classification or higher.

5.3 Level weightings

We have addressed the significant variation in the extent to which level 5 study contributed to the final award. Because such variability is confusing to students and suggests a somewhat arbitrary decision about the significance of a level 5 contribution, we have now re-specified all courses such that, unless there is a clear rationale for not including a contribution of level 5, all courses will be weighted 20:80 level 5:level 6 in the final award calculation.

5.4 Borderline conventions

We have removed the inconsistency of award boards across the University particularly for students at the borderline of two classifications. Different award boards have historically used different variations of the rules to enable students with particular profiles at the top of a classification band to be awarded a degree in the higher band.

5.5 Moderation

NTU has a clear policy on the moderation of grades which establishes whether judgements are at the appropriate standard, are consistent, and are in line with the assessment criteria. Moderation also involves consideration of descriptive statistics related to assessment grading.

5.6 Rounding conventions

NTU operates the conventional method of rounding at all levels of aggregation: below 0.5 is rounded down; 0.5 and above is rounded up. This decision aligns with the principles of simplicity and transparency.

5.7 Discounting

The NTU assessment framework does not allow for discounting of credits in the final award. All course learning outcomes must have been demonstrated, and all modules awarded a pass in order to achieve the award. Where assessment of a (limited) number of credits does not reach the pass threshold, the award will only be given when there is evidence that the learning outcomes associated with the missing credit have been evidenced elsewhere.

5.8 Criterion-referenced decisions

Decisions about award classifications are explicitly criterion-referenced and not norm-referenced. This has always been the case and continues to be the case. Moderation policy explicitly does not allow for norm referencing or comparisons with external benchmarks.

6. Teaching Practices and Learning Resources

NTU has seen significant improvements in areas of learning, teaching, student support, and resources, which explain an increase in numbers of students attaining good degrees (2008/09 – present). Our entry tariff has steadily risen over this period, suggesting that our students are better placed to benefit from their studies.

The improvements that we have made during this period, align to areas which have demonstrable impact on learning gain (Gibbs, 2010). Significant work has taken place through the NTU 'Success for All' project which has concentrated effort on making positive changes to approaches to learning (for example wider collaborative learning experiences); to assessment (redesigning assessment tasks; improving the quality, timeliness and transparency of assessment feedback); and to the design of the curriculum. Indeed, collaborative learning has been an important focus over this period. Evaluation of NTU's SCALE-UP programme (a collaborative learning approach which is used extensively across NTU) has demonstrated that this approach is associated with improved student outcomes and is a useful strategy in addressing unexplained disparities for different equality groups. We have a nationally recognised Student Dashboard which provides staff and students information about student engagement with their course and provides an important tool for tutors to get to know their students better, and to improve support and referral. Every first year student is also assigned a student mentor who helps them settle into NTU by providing peer-to-peer support. Investment has also been made in academic staff development and training, with a focus on personal tutor development and HEA recognition.

7. Risks and Challenges

A significant challenge is to reduce the awarding gaps that still remain when we make comparisons of student performance across different equality groups. For students graduating in 2018/19, there remain gaps in the proportion of students achieving a first or 2:1 when we compare white student performance with black student performance, advantaged with disadvantaged students and young with mature students. An extensive programme of work is underway to address this challenge; framed by the University's published Access and Participation Plan targets.

8. Concluding Remarks and Further developments

Decisions about the assessment framework at NTU are taken with explicit reference to a set of shared values: that assessment should be fair, transparent, consistent, non-arbitrary and non-inflationary. These values have steered our approach in review, and have been used when testing our conclusions. NTU's approach to assessment has been received positively – through discussions with Universities UK and the Quality Assurance Agency about the principles behind the approach, and the potential impact of the changes, we have been able to provide a credible and principled demonstration of how we can preserve the value of our degrees for *all* students.

Building on our extensive work to date, the next stage will set out recommendations related to specific assessment regulations which govern the provisions for students who have failed an assessment, or who, due to extenuating circumstances need to submit at a later date. Recommendations for change will only be made where these explicitly align to the NTU principles outlined above. The purpose of any change would be to ensure parity for all students within a simple and transparent process. This work will be completed alongside reflections about the appropriateness and sustainability of NTU's assessment regulations and the challenges posed by the impact of COVID-19 on teaching, learning and assessment practices.