

Nottingham Trent University

Degree Outcomes Statement March 2023

1. Introduction

The purpose of this statement is to describe Nottingham Trent University's (NTU) alignment with the expectations of the UK Quality Code and the Office for Students' ongoing conditions of registration 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.**

This statement is prepared by the Centre for Academic Development and Quality and its annual update was considered by Academic Standards and Quality Committee on 21st March 2023.

2. Institutional degree classification profile

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

Over the last few years we have made adjustments to NTU's grade-based assessment framework in several ways, set out in sections 4 – 6 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.

Patterns in student outcomes should be interpreted within the broader context of a set of significant factors which have played their part over the last few years. In 2019/20, the University, and the sector, reported somewhat higher outcomes for students explained by the range of no detriment measures that were put in place to mitigate effects of the pandemic. The OfS require universities to commit to a return to pre-pandemic levels of performance by the end of 2023. This is in recognition that grades in 2019/20 and 2020/21 were likely to be inflated due to the mitigating effects (quite appropriately) applied by institutions (for example safety nets and changes to extenuating circumstances policies).

For the cohort of undergraduate students graduating in the summer of 2022, proportions of degree classifications returned to pre-pandemic (2018/19) levels. It is important to note, of course, that 2018/9

was the year in which the first cohort of students graduated under the revised GBA framework. This framework protects the University's outcomes from artefactual grade inflation, and in 2018/19 we saw an important reduction in the number of first class awards. The fact that the University has returned to similar pre-pandemic levels means that we can be confident of our continued standard of the NTU award which is protected from the artefactual grade inflation inherent in the percentage system.

When degree outcome is broken down by School, we do see variation in the extent to which the pattern of outcomes has returned to pre-pandemic levels. The University is currently exploring why some Schools have higher proportion of students achieving an upper award (2:1 or first) than others.

The tables and figure below summarise these student outcomes.

Class awarded	2021/22		2020/21		2019/20		2018/19		2017/18		difference between 2021/22 and 2020/21	difference between 2021/22 and 2018/19
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
1st Class Honours	1,481	18.5%	1,475	19.1%	1,312	20.0%	1,103	17.5%	1,555	24.7%	-0.6 pp	0.9 pp
2nd Class Honours-1st Division (2:1)	4,174	52.0%	4,271	55.2%	3,674	56.0%	3,206	50.9%	3,023	48.0%	-3.2 pp	1.1 pp
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division (2:2)	1,864	23.2%	1,604	20.7%	1,365	20.8%	1,629	25.9%	1,390	22.1%	2.5 pp	-2.6 pp
3rd Class Honours	308	3.8%	226	2.9%	123	1.9%	246	3.9%	196	3.1%	0.9 pp	-0.1 pp
Ordinary Degree	196	2.4%	162	2.1%	92	1.4%	110	1.7%	139	2.2%	0.3 pp	0.7 pp
Total number of students	8,023	100.0%	7,738	100.0%	6,566	100.0%	6,294	100.0%	6,303	100.0%		
Combined 1st/2:1	5,655	70.5%	5,746	74.3%	4,986	75.9%	4,309	68.5%	4,578	72.6%	-3.8%	2.0%

Table 1: Undergraduate student outcomes – University aggregation

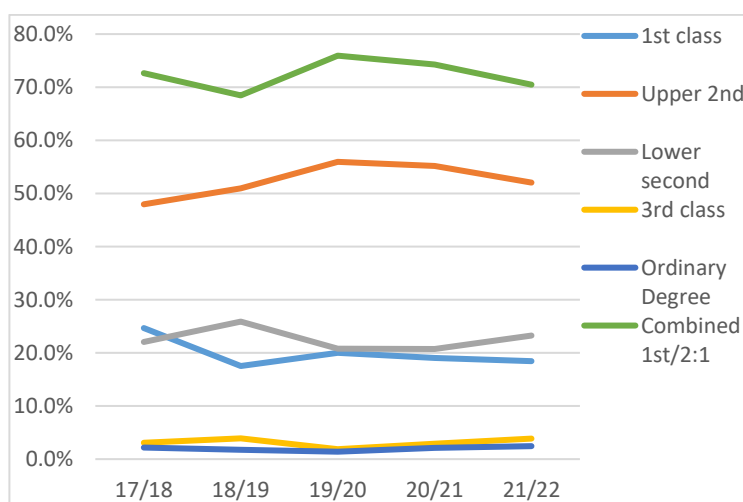


Figure 1: Proportion of undergraduate award classifications over time.

	2021/22		2020/21		2019/20		2018/19		2017/18		difference between 2021/22 and 2020/21	difference between 2021/22 and 2018/19
<i>Bachelor's degrees (all NTU provision)</i>	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	pp difference	pp difference
1st Class Honours	1,428	18.3%	1,409	18.9%	1,264	19.8%	1,055	17.3%	1,486	24.8%	-0.6pp	1.1pp
2nd Class Honours-1st Division (2:1)	4,067	52.2%	4,145	55.6%	3,583	56.2%	3,140	51.4%	2,902	48.5%	-3.3pp	0.8pp
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division (2:2)	1,817	23.3%	1,538	20.6%	1,322	20.7%	1,574	25.8%	1,291	21.6%	2.7pp	-2.4pp
3rd Class Honours	288	3.7%	212	2.8%	119	1.9%	236	3.9%	174	2.9%	0.9pp	-0.2pp
Ordinary Degree	188	2.4%	155	2.1%	88	1.4%	104	1.7%	127	2.1%	0.3pp	0.7pp
Total number of students	7,788		7,459		6,376		6,109		5,980			
Combined 1st/2:1	5,495	70.6%	5,554	74.5%	4,847	76.0%	4,195	68.7%	4,388	73.4%	-3.9pp	1.9pp
	2021/22		2020/21		2019/20		2018/19		2017/18		difference between 2021/22 and 2020/21	difference between 2021/22 and 2018/19
<i>Top-up degrees</i>	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	pp difference	pp difference
1st Class Honours	14	9.4%	33	15.0%	18	12.7%	16	11.3%	45	16.4%	-5.6pp	-2.0pp
2nd Class Honours-1st Division (2:1)	60	40.3%	100	45.5%	76	53.5%	54	38.3%	101	36.7%	-5.2pp	2.0pp
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division (2:2)	47	31.5%	66	30.0%	43	30.3%	55	39.0%	95	34.5%	1.5pp	-7.5pp
3rd Class Honours	20	13.4%	14	6.4%	4	2.8%	10	7.1%	22	8.0%	7.1pp	6.3pp
Ordinary Degree	8	5.4%	7	3.2%	1	0.7%	6	4.3%	12	4.4%	2.2pp	1.1pp
Total number of students	149		220		142		141		275			
Combined 1st/2:1	74	49.7%	133	60.5%	94	66.2%	70	49.6%	146	53.1%	-10.8pp	0.0pp
	2021/22		2020/21		2019/20		2018/19		2017/18		difference between 2021/22 and 2020/21	difference between 2021/22 and 2018/19
<i>Undergraduate courses with postgraduate elements</i>	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	pp difference	pp difference
1st Class Honours	39	45.3%	33	55.9%	30	62.5%	32	72.7%	24	50.0%	-10.6pp	-27.4pp
2nd Class Honours-1st Division (2:1)	47	54.7%	26	44.1%	15	31.3%	12	27.3%	20	41.7%	10.6pp	27.4pp
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division (2:2)	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	8.3%	0.0pp	0.0pp
3rd Class Honours											0.0pp	0.0pp
Ordinary Degree	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	6.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0.0pp	0.0pp
Total number of students	86		59		48		44		48			
Combined 1st/2:1	86	100%	59	100%	45	93.8%	44	100%	44	91.7%	0.0pp	0.0pp

Table 2: Undergraduate student outcomes – split by award type

3. Student characteristics and progress in relation to Access and Participation targets

As a condition of registration with the Office for Students (OfS), all Higher Education Providers must work to reduce equality gaps in access and student success. NTU's targets agreed with the OfS include degree outcome targets for certain student groups. These are set out in our Access and Participation Plan (APP) 2020–25. Progress on relevant targets for the most recent 2021/22 cohort are summarised below.

Black versus white students

There was a reduction in the combined number of 2:1s / First class awards achieved by black students, from 54.6% in 2020/21 to 51.8% in 2021/22. There was also a reduction for white students; from 81.2% to 77.8% over the same period. This 'degree awarding gap' between white and black students varies amongst the seven schools with a large enough black cohort to warrant a target (The School of Animal, Rural and Environmental Studies and Confetti Institute of Creative Technologies have a very small black student cohort) but the largest gap (35 percentage points) was found in the School of Science and Technology, followed by the Nottingham Law School (32 percentage points) and Nottingham Business School (29 percentage points).

Disadvantaged versus advantaged students

NTU aims to reduce the gap between disadvantaged (Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintile 1) and advantaged (IMD quintile 5) students in achieving a 2:1 or a first class degree. In the cohort graduating in 2022, this awarding gap increased from 14 percentage points to 16.8 percentage points.

Two Schools (Animal, Rural and Environmental Sciences and Confetti Institute of Creative Technologies) achieved their annual target. The other seven Schools fell outside their targets, with the School of Architecture, Design and the Built Environment (31 percentage points) and the School of Art and Design (24 percentage points) having the largest gaps.

Mature versus young students

The mature versus young degree awarding gap reduced from 7.2 percentage points to 5.8 percentage points and, as a result, the University met its 2021/22 target of 6 percentage points. Six of the nine Schools achieved their 2021/22 target. Mature students studying Science & Technology courses achieved considerably lower rates of 2:1 or First Class awards than previous years, with a resultant gap of 19 percentage points.

4. Assessment and Marking Practices at NTU

NTU grading framework

NTU has 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.

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.

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 module which is compulsory for all staff with a learning and teaching responsibility who are not eligible to do the full postgraduate qualification;

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 'Principles for effective degree algorithm design' (UUK, July 2020). They are published in the University's [Common Assessment Regulations](#).

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. Students studying within collaborative arrangements

The University works in collaboration with a range of other providers. This includes arrangements where we franchise or work in partnership to provide a dual degree or deliver a programme jointly. Student outcomes for joint delivery is included in the outcome tables above.

The University also validates other partners' awards. Student numbers for final year bachelors awards are very small and any comparison of degree outcomes should be made with caution.

The tables below show student outcomes for 2021/22 across the remaining different collaborative arrangements.

Dual Degrees

These data related to the BA (Hons) International Business suite of dual degrees (incoming and outgoing). Students from this course are high performing, as evidenced in the high proportion of students awarded an upper degree (2:1 or First class).

	2021/22		2020/21		2019/20		2018/19		2017/18	
<i>Bachelor's degrees delivered as part of Dual Degree arrangements</i>	No. students	% students	No. students	% students	No. students	% students	No. students	% students	No. students	% students
1st Class Honours	8	22.2%	16	64.0%	11	45.8%	10	76.9%	25	58.1%
2nd Class Honours-1st Division (2:1)	26	72.2%	8	32.0%	13	54.2%	3	23.1%	16	37.2%
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division (2:2)	2	5.6%		0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	4.7%
3rd Class Honours										
Ordinary Degree	0	0.0%	1	4.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Total number of students	36	100.0%	25	100.0%	24	100.0%	13	100.0%	43	100.0%
Combined 1st/2:1	34	94.4%	24	96.0%	24	100.0%	13	100.0%	41	95.3%

Validation Service

There is only one three-year Bachelors degree under the Validation Service. In 2021/22, none of the four students studying this course achieved a First class honours degree or 2:1; however, all did successfully complete, with two achieving a 2:2 and two achieving a Third class honours.

7. 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.

Our ambitions to enhance student outcomes 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. Significant investment has also been made in academic staff development and training, with a focus on personal tutor development, and HEA recognition.

Recent 'Success for All' projects include decolonisation, a black leadership programme, extra-curricular activities, and a calling service for students at risk. We have committed to increasing personalisation and flexibility for students studying on courses through the FlexNTU initiative which continues to be a priority investment.

Our longitudinal study, Student 2025, explores the academic and social experiences and sense of belonging of a sample of 100 students from Access and Participation plan groups and counterfactual comparison students. This project is aimed at generating evidence on closing degree outcomes gaps and to develop a better understanding of non-continuation.

8. 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 Academic Assurance and Regulation Committee of the Board of Governors receives thematic papers which set out the current state-of-play with respect to standards and quality.

9. 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 who graduated in 2021/22, there

remain gaps in the proportion of students achieving a first class degree 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.

10. 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, 2022/23 will see the introduction of revised regulations which govern the provisions for students who, due to extenuating circumstances, have failed an assessment, or who need to submit at a later date.

The University is also focusing on work aimed to address the variation of proportions of different degree classifications across different subject areas.