

# Nottingham Trent University

## Degree Outcomes Statement April 2024

# 1. Introduction

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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 9<sup>th</sup> May 2024.

## 2. Institutional degree classification profile

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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 section 4 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 required 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. This remained consistent in 2022/23. It is

important to note that 2018/19 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.

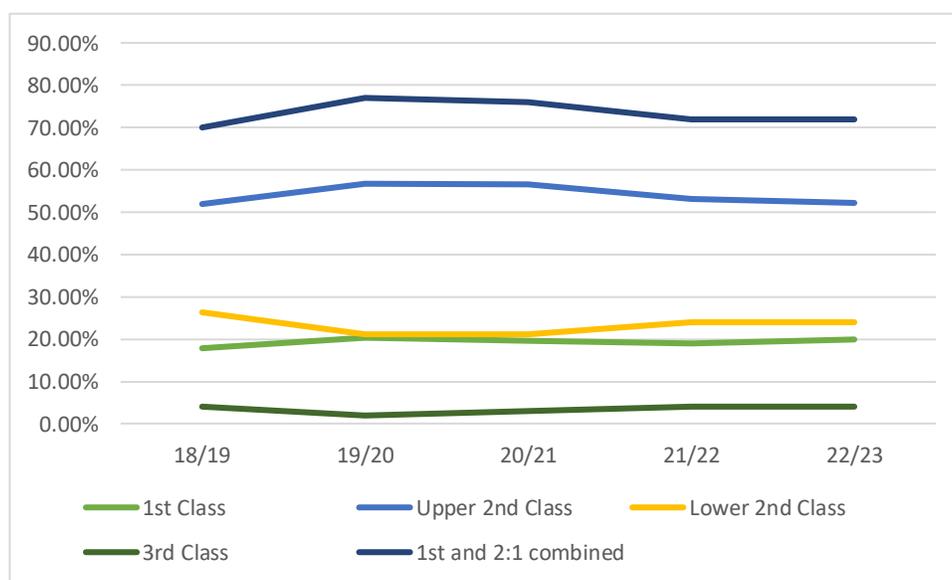
When degree outcome is broken down by School, we do see variation in the extent to which the pattern of outcomes has returned to pre-pandemic levels. The University is currently exploring why some Schools have higher proportion of students achieving an upper award (2:1 or first) than others.

The tables and figure below summarise these student outcomes.

Table 1: Undergraduate student outcomes – University aggregation

Lens Name	All Metrics (inc. Num/Denom)									
	201819		201920		202021		202122		202223	
	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%
<b>Student Outcomes</b>										
<b>M0006 - All Hons. Degree Students (Denominator)</b>	<b>6,184</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>6,476</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>7,580</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>7,897</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>8,131</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
1st Class Honours	1,102	17.8%	1,313	20.3%	1,477	19.5%	1,490	18.9%	1,617	19.9%
2nd Class Honours-1st Division	3,207	51.9%	3,675	56.7%	4,273	56.4%	4,204	53.2%	4,247	52.2%
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division	1,629	26.3%	1,365	21.1%	1,603	21.1%	1,888	23.9%	1,943	23.9%
3rd Class Honours	246	4.0%	123	1.9%	227	3.0%	315	4.0%	324	4.0%

Figure 1: Proportion of undergraduate award classifications over time.



The table below indicates the number and proportion of undergraduate degree classifications split by course type.

Table 2: Undergraduate student outcomes – split by course type

### Bachelor's Degrees

Lens Name	All Metrics (inc. Num/Denom)									
	201819		201920		202021		202122		202223	
	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%
Student Outcomes										
M0006 - All Hons. Degree Students (Denominator)	6,005	100.0%	6,290	100.0%	7,308	100.0%	7,641	100.0%	7,855	100.0%
1st Class Honours	1,054	17.6%	1,265	20.1%	1,411	19.3%	1,434	18.8%	1,545	19.7%
2nd Class Honours-1st Division	3,141	52.3%	3,584	57.0%	4,147	56.7%	4,086	53.5%	4,124	52.5%
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division	1,574	26.2%	1,322	21.0%	1,537	21.0%	1,829	23.9%	1,879	23.9%
3rd Class Honours	236	3.9%	119	1.9%	213	2.9%	292	3.8%	307	3.9%

### L6 Top Up Route

Lens Name	All Metrics (inc. Num/Denom)									
	201819		201920		202021		202122		202223	
	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%
Student Outcomes										
M0006 - All Hons. Degree Students (Denominator)	135	100.0%	141	100.0%	213	100.0%	170	100.0%	170	100.0%
1st Class Honours	16	11.9%	18	12.8%	33	15.5%	17	10.0%	17	10.0%
2nd Class Honours-1st Division	54	40.0%	76	53.9%	100	46.9%	71	41.8%	76	44.7%
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division	55	40.7%	43	30.5%	66	31.0%	59	34.7%	60	35.3%
3rd Class Honours	10	7.4%	4	2.8%	14	6.6%	23	13.5%	17	10.0%

### Undergraduate degrees with post graduate elements

Lens Name	All Metrics (inc. Num/Denom)									
	201819		201920		202021		202122		202223	
	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%
Student Outcomes										
M0006 - All Hons. Degree Students (Denominator)	44	100.0%	45	100.0%	59	100.0%	86	100.0%	106	100.0%
1st Class Honours	32	72.7%	30	66.7%	33	55.9%	39	45.3%	55	51.9%
2nd Class Honours-1st Division	12	27.3%	15	33.3%	26	44.1%	47	54.7%	47	44.3%
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division									4	3.8%

### Foundation degrees

Lens Name	All Metrics (inc. Num/Denom)									
	201819		201920		202021		202122		202223	
	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%
Student Outcomes										
M0014 - Progressing Students (Numerator)	265	100.0%	266	100.0%	283	100.0%	297	100.0%	271	100.0%
Pass	142	53.6%	111	41.7%	135	47.7%	131	44.1%	139	51.3%
Pass with Commendation	97	36.6%	113	42.5%	110	38.9%	112	37.7%	98	36.2%
Pass with Distinction	26	9.8%	42	15.8%	38	13.4%	54	18.2%	34	12.5%

## 3. Assessment and Marking Practices at NTU

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### 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;

## 4. Grading scale, calculations and the NTU degree algorithm

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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.

## 5. Students studying within collaborative arrangements

The University works in collaboration with a range of other providers. This includes arrangements where we franchise foundation degrees 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 table below shows student outcomes for 2022/23 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) .

Table Three: Student Outcomes for Dual Degrees

Lens Name	All Metrics (inc. Num/Denom)									
	201819		201920		202021		202122		202223	
Academic Year	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%
Metric Group										
Student Outcomes										
M0006 - All Hons. Degree Students (Denominator)	12	100.0%	25	100.0%	26	100.0%	36	100.0%	35	100.0%
1st Class Honours	9	75.0%	12	48.0%	18	69.2%	8	22.2%	16	45.7%
2nd Class Honours-1st Division	3	25.0%	13	52.0%	8	30.8%	26	72.2%	14	40.0%
2nd Class Honours-2nd Division							2	5.6%	4	11.4%
3rd Class Honours									1	2.9%
M0007 - % Upper Degree (1st & 2:1)	100.0%		100.0%		100.0%		94.4%		85.7%	
M0008 - % First Class Hons. Degree	75.0%		48.0%		69.2%		22.2%		45.7%	

### Franchised foundation degrees

Table four presents a breakdown of degree classifications awarded for the last 4 years for foundation degrees which operate under franchise arrangements

Table Four: Student Outcomes for franchised Foundation Degrees

Lens Name	All Metrics (inc. Num/Denom)							
	201920		202021		202122		202223	
Academic Year	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%	Value	%
Metric Group								
Student Outcomes								
M0082 - All Students (Denominator)	4	100.0%	19	100.0%	3	100.0%	11	100.0%
Pass	2	50.0%	9	47.4%	1	33.3%	3	27.3%
Pass with Commendation	2	50.0%	6	31.6%	1	33.3%	6	54.5%
Pass with Distinction			4	21.1%	1	33.3%	2	18.2%
M0083 - Pass with Distinction %	0.0%		21.1%		33.3%		18.2%	

## Validation Service

Students studying a validated undergraduate award achieved the following outcomes:

Award Classification	Percentage
First class Honours	15%
2 <sup>nd</sup> Class Honours – first division	37%
2 <sup>nd</sup> Class Honours – second division	31%
3 <sup>rd</sup> Class Honours	17%

Students studying a validated foundation degree achieved the following outcomes:

Award Classification	Percentage
Pass with Distinction	20%
Pass with Commendation	30%
Pass	50%

## 6. Teaching Practices and Learning Resources

NTU has seen significant improvements in areas of learning, teaching, student support, and resources, reflected in the TEF 2023 rating of Gold.

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. 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, our Academic Professional Award has the highest rate of distinction awards in the sector (data provided by Advance HE).

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.

## **7. Academic governance**

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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.

## **8. Risks and Challenges**

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An area of focus is to improve the level 4 to level 5 continuation rate. Schools are developing individual interventions and approaches to support students in their studies and to improve these continuation rates.

## **9. Concluding Remarks and Further developments**

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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.

We have ongoing work to reflect on educational gain, ensuring our values with regards to this are reflected throughout our courses and wider student experience. We are making more effective use of data to explore student outcomes and to inform development and change.

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