UKSCQA consultation on updates to the degree classification system: a submission from the British Academy

February 2019

The following response was submitted on 8 February 2019.

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1. Does the adoption of a UK sector-wide statement of intent represent an effective approach to meeting the challenges outlined in the report?
a. Yes
b. No
c. In part
Please explain your response.

The Academy agrees that a UK sector-wide statement of intent could be a welcome addition and may help to support a positive culture of self-regulation, collaboration and improvement of sector practice. However, this on its own is unlikely to be an effective solution.

Since only a portion of increases in average grades are unexplained and it is unlikely that all of this portion represents potentially unwanted and unwarranted grade inflation, UKSCQA, QAA and the wider sector must engage proactively with the Office for Students and the Department for Education to ensure that the efforts taken to find an effective solution are proportionate and ultimately represent value in their impact.

Potential grade inflation is likely to be a symptom of wider problems relating to competitive market forces. These are discussed in the technical report which accompanies the consultation and need to be tackled alongside any sector-led response if the identified challenges are to be addressed.

Focusing only on institutional practice fails to acknowledge the contradictory pressures on providers to perform in league tables as well as against regulatory requirements and metrics in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework. These pressures can allow focus to stray from quality enhancement and may stifle sector innovation. It is important for the statement to acknowledge this and to be complemented with approaches to ease perverse incentives from competitive and market-oriented logics such as league tables.

2. What other approaches could be explored to address the issues at a UK sector-wide level?

More evidence should be gathered on the impact of potential grade inflation on the signalling power of grades to employers, particularly in the UK context. Recent evidence from higher education in the United States suggests, despite a long history of increases in average grades, the impact of potential grade inflation on employer signalling has been negligible and that the labour market has tended to respond by using a broader basket of measures as proxies of ability.[1] This is something which should be looked at in more detail.

Notwithstanding the importance of maintaining and strengthening the integrity of academic standards, the focus on potential grade inflation should not deter practices which support and enhance a more holistic and nuanced understanding of graduate skills and the contribution they make to the economy and in wider society and public life. As the labour market responds to

[1] Pattison, E., E. Grodsky and C. Muller (2013) "Is the Sky Falling? Grade Inflation and the Signaling Power of Grades", Educational Researcher, 42(5), 259-265
Boleslavsky, R. and C. Cotton (2014) "The unrecognised benefits of grade inflation", VoxEU / Centre for Economic Policy Research
See also: Millman, J, S.P. Slovacek, E. Kulick and K.J. Mitchell. (1983) "Does Grade Inflation Affect the Reliability of Grades?" Research in Higher Education 19(4):423–429.

challenges of fragmentation, automation and computerisation, a broader approach to evaluating skills and abilities is likely to be even more warranted. A more holistic approach to evaluating ability improves the likelihood of the employer picking the right graduate for the job and improves the prospects for that graduate.

League table providers should be encouraged to remove "good degrees" as a measure from their algorithms. The Academy explains its position on this point in response to Question 18.

5. Are the evidence areas proposed at Table A for inclusion within a 'degree outcomes statement' appropriate for supporting an institution to identify potential 'grade inflation' risks and provide assurance to maintain public confidence?
a. Yes
b. No
c. In part
Please explain your response.

All of this information would be reasonable to have published in a single, accessible statement. Much of it could be considered material information for prospective and current students from the perspective of consumer protections legislation. Institutions already publish much of this information in their rules and regulations, therefore a statement would simply make this information more accessible and provide more useful context to it.

If this proposal is taken forward, it will be important to keep the statement short and accessible, particularly in the display of quantitative data, so that it is of use to students and to employers and helps to build confidence and understanding.

6. Do you consider there to be merit in gaining assurance from an 'external advisor on academic standards'?
a. Yes (please explain your response)
b. No (please set out any other mechanisms for enhancing external assurance)

The British Academy is unclear from the proposals what additional value an 'external advisor on academic standards' would provide, and whether this value, if any, is worth the additional resource. It is quite possible that external advisors would be unnecessary given the functions already fulfilled by external examiners, which are already proposed to be strengthened, and the existing use of external advisors for programme approval and review.

7. What are the:
a. opportunities and/or
b. challenges
associated with including the commitments to strengthening the external examiner system in the statement of intent?

The British Academy does not take a view on the role of external examiners at undergraduate level. However, we note that the proposals continue the direction of travel already established by previous reviews of quality assurance in higher education, particularly in the need to ensure appropriate training and support for external examiners.

It is important any new guidance for, or 'strengthening' of, the existing system of external examination recognises both institutional and disciplinary differences and does not impose or encourage uniformity of practice at the expense of overall quality of academic judgement.

9. What are the barriers to implementing the recommendations in 'Understanding degree algorithms', particularly the publication and explanation of degree algorithm practices?

Institutions should generally not struggle to publish and explain degree algorithm practice. However, as such practice may have been in place for some time, and potentially developed and agreed on by different people working in different contexts, it would be unhelpful if institutions were expected to retrospectively apply justifications in such circumstances.

Instead, it would be most helpful to encourage a culture of evaluating existing practice against present academic judgement and policy context, and to ensure that explanations for future changes are properly identified and published.

As degree classification is an academic decision, it seems sensible for providers to give ultimate responsibility for explaining and justifying degree algorithm practice to its Senate or equivalent most senior academic body.

10. Should the statement of intent contain a provider's explanations of:
a. weighting of marks? <mark>Yes</mark>/No
b. 'zones of consideration'? <mark>Yes</mark>/No
c. 'discounting' low performing modules? <mark>Yes</mark>/No
d. PSRB influences on algorithm design? <mark>Yes</mark>/No
Please explain your responses.

It is reasonable to expect providers to explain these aspects of their degree algorithms. However, the most valuable explanations will be for justifying future changes rather than in attempting to explain existing rules. As mentioned in response to Question 9, the explanations of existing rules, particularly those that have been longstanding, are retrospective and may not resemble the original reasoning behind the decision. Nevertheless, there may be wider benefit in encouraging explanation of current rules as it may prompt a reconsideration of elements that have no clear justification and that may be out of kilter with best practice.

11. Does the proposed classification description in Annex A provide an appropriate reference point for degree classification practice?
<mark>a. Yes</mark>
b. No
Please explain your response.

The classification description provides a suitable baseline from which individual programme-specific assessment criteria can be designed. While open to some variance in interpretation, the language used is likely to draw reasonable consensus over its meaning in relation to learning outcomes, across the range of disciplines.

It is likely that this description will be most useful to new providers. More established providers may or may not find this useful as many are likely to have more elaborate criteria at a subject and programme level. It is important that where well-established programme-specific criteria is already in place, such generic baseline criteria do not lead to over-standardisation.

It may be worth performing cognitive testing of the descriptors with both staff and students, rather than simply consulting on the proposals, to ensure there is an acceptable level of consistency in interpretation, including between those from different subject areas.

13. Do you agree that the proposed classification description should be incorporated into national quality assurance and regulatory frameworks, as is appropriate for different national contexts? In England, this would mean the use of the proposed classification description as 'sector-recognised standards' as defined in section 13(3) of HERA.

In order to adopt the classification description as part of sector regulation, it is important that national funding and regulatory bodies hold an understanding of the classification description that is broadly synonymous with that of higher education professionals working in each national context.

15. What are the:
a. benefits
b. challenges, and/or
c. national considerations
of using a shared sector metric to inform institutional self-assessment of degree classifications over time?

The main concern of introducing any shared metric is whether the behaviour change it incentivises genuinely improves practice or simply improves performance against the metric. Put another way, metrics must incentivise change that is in the student (and wider stakeholder) interest, but poorly designed metrics may simply drive practice towards the metric, potentially stifling other innovations that could prove of greater overall benefit.

It is important, therefore, that careful consideration and extensive consultation and testing takes place before any new metrics are introduced, even if such metrics are intended for self-assessment and not for public information or ranking.

18. Should the sector explore the steps that could be taken to remove, or reduce the impact of, the inclusion of upper degrees (1st and 2.1 awards) in algorithms used to rank university performance?
a. Yes
b. No

Please explain your response.

The British Academy believes that league tables create significant market pressures on providers which in turn create incentives to "game" the underlying metrics used to determine league table positions. This behaviour is a typical feature in quasi-markets where competition is driven by the publication of performance and benchmarking data to inform service users.

The Academy published *Measuring Success* on the use of league tables in the public sector, providing a detailed evaluation of their use in education quasi-markets, including higher education. The report highlighted perverse behaviours driven by league tables have intensified since the introduction of £9,000 fees.[2]

The inclusion of 'good degrees' as a measure in league tables is likely to create undue pressure on institutions to increase the number of graduates with first and upper-second degrees. Moreover, its value as a source of student information is very limited and more likely to mislead prospective students than inform them about the quality of a programme. We believe that, overall, the evidence suggests it is unnecessary and unhelpful to use information on degree outcomes to rank providers, as such information is open to many different and often misleading interpretations by prospective students and provides little to no value in making a well-informed decision of what or where to study.

The Academy therefore strongly supports measures to remove upper degree awards as a measure in league table rankings. The technical report suggested removing degree outcomes from league-table algorithms while keeping data on degree outcomes public. It would be acceptable, for instance, for information on degree outcomes to be published as part of a provider's degree outcomes statement, but not for the purposes of ranking the performance of one provider over another.

19. What should be the parameters and remit for a UK-wide task and finish group on the long-term sustainability of the UK's degree classification systems?

While the Academy believes that there is merit in developing a Task and Finish group, it is important to note the existence, either currently or previously, of groups in the sector set up with the aim of developing employer engagement and the HEAR, and alternative degree classification models such as GPA. Several of these were run by the Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE).

Before setting up another group, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of previous attempts to strategically coordinate change in assessment and qualifications across a diverse sector facing multiple challenges and uncertainties. The previous difficulties in standardising practice and measuring impact in the implementation of the HEAR, as highlighted by the 2018 update on implementation[3], and the significant length of time taken for the initiative to develop, suggest that designing and implementing strategies for long-term cohesion and sustainability of the degree classification system will require significant time and resource to build support both from providers and from policymakers. Coordination and cross-membership with existing groups will be an essential feature for a Task and Finish group to prevent duplication or unhelpful divergence.

The Academy feel that the Task and finish group may overwhelm itself if it attempts to review too many areas. In particular, the failure to progress with changes to the honours degree classification system following the conclusion of the Grade Point Average Pilot in 2015 suggests that such a group is unlikely to come to a workable consensus over a new classification structure, especially in terms of its signalling to employers. It seems sensible to focus attention on employer engagement, especially to build a stronger and more holistic understanding of graduate skills and competencies, something which the Academy has highlighted in its report *The Right Skills*.[4] A recent survey by the Institute of Student Employers suggests that employers increasingly contextualise grades and

[2] Foley, B. and H. Goldstein (2012) *Measuring Success: League tables in the public sector.* British Academy
[3] Centre for Recording Achievement (2018) *The Higher Education Achievement Report: an update on implementation*
[4] The British Academy (2017) *The Right Skills: Celebrating skills in the arts, humanities and social sciences*

look for a more rounded picture.[5] Finding more reliable signals of skills and attributes to employers, and supporting students to articulate them, will relieve the pressure on degree classification as the main proxy for ability.

20. Which of the following options for reforming or enhancing the degree classification system should be considered in more detail? (Please indicate Yes/No) Reform option Yes/No
- **Introduction of new upper award - for example, a starred first**
- **Introduction of a 'cohort ranking' - for example, providing additional**
- **information on graduates' position in the grade distribution**
- **Resetting the classification boundaries - for example, moving up by 10 marks so 80 = 1st and so on**
- **More regular review of Subject Benchmark Statements to keep pace with improvements in teaching and learning**
- **Universal HEAR format**
- **Other (please explain)**
- **No reform required**

Before undertaking any further reforms, it is important that considerable thought is given to ensuring that current and future, but also previous, students are not disadvantaged if there are significant changes to long-established practice in degree classification. In particular, communication about any changes, particularly communication to address public and employer understanding, is essential.

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[5] Isherwood, S. (2018) "Grade inflation: should we care?", ISE Blogs: 22 August 2018