

Degree Outcomes Statement

Summary

This Degree Outcomes Statement, approved by the University's Executive, Learning and Teaching Committee, Senate and Council, and which has also been scrutinised by our internal auditors and an independent reviewer, summarises the outcomes of an institutional review of how the University meets the expectations of the QAA Quality Code and the Office for Students' ongoing conditions of registration (B4 and B5¹) that relate to protecting the value of qualifications.

Related University Regulations, Policies, and Guidance

The Statement has referenced the University's academic regulations, as considered and approved on an annual basis by the University's Regulation Sub-Committee (RSC) and University Learning and Teaching Committee (ULTC), and the University's published [Access and Participation Plan](#).

1 Institutional degree classification profile

Office for Students (OfS) data shows that Aston University has awarded a significantly greater proportion of 1st and 2.1 degrees than the sector average since 2010. A large proportion of our students take up a placement year, and our own research shows that this drives our above sector average performance in terms of both degree attainment and graduate levels of employment². We also offer a high standard of academic and pastoral support to students; a fact reflected in our excellent continuation rates.

Aston is one of the most diverse universities in the UK, with nearly 70% of our students coming from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Ninety-four percent of our students attended a state school and more than half come from areas considered the least advantaged. Moreover, the numbers and the proportions of students from BAME and disadvantaged backgrounds has also increased over the past six years. Regardless of a student's background, we aim to support them to succeed. The overall proportion of 2.1 and 1st degrees awarded by Aston University has risen from 77.0% in 2012-13 to 87.6% in 2018-19 (see Table 1)³. This rise reflects improved degree outcomes for all – an increase of 13.0% for BAME students and an increase of 7.3% for White students. Our National Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Quintile (Q) 1-Q2 students have also shown larger increases in the percentage of 2.1 and 1st class degrees than the corresponding Q3-Q5 students (10.7% vs. 5.9%). In 2019, therefore, performance by different socio-economic groups have decreased, and we have seen a more equitable picture than in 2012, in line with our ongoing commitment to social mobility. We do not believe that small changes in average entry tariff or the subject mix offered by Aston University can account for our variations in degree outcomes. There are a number of factors which we think have contributed to our improved degree outcomes including: improved teaching and support, closing of attainment gaps, compulsory placement years, and the support from Learning Development Centre, which open to all students. We will reflect further on sector practice in these areas.

¹ Condition B4: The provider must ensure that qualifications awarded to students hold their value at the point of qualification and over time, in line with sector recognised standards.

Condition B5: The provider must deliver courses that meet the academic standards as they are described in the Framework for Higher Education Qualification (FHEQ) at Level 4 or higher.

² Moores & Reddy (2012). No regrets? Measuring the career benefits of a psychology placement year. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. 37, 5, p. 535-554. Reddy & Moores (2006) Measuring the benefits of a psychology placement year, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. 31, 5, p. 551-567

³ Our analysis covers the years from 2012-3 to 2018-19 (six academic years), but for brevity we present alternate years in Table 1.

		2012-13		2014-15		2016-17		2018-19	
		Full Time		Full Time		Full Time		Full Time	
% of Degrees classified as 1st or 2:1 by split		Denominator	%	Denominator	%	Denominator	%	Denominator	%
Overall	Overall	1675	77.0	1417	87.6	1951	83.0	1955	87.6
Age ⁴	Young	1509	77.8	1279	88.2	1806	84.0	1100	90.6
	Mature	166	69.3	138	82.6	145	70.3	855	84.0
POLAR Quintile ⁵	Q1 or Q2	259	80.7	233	91	393	83.2	445	88.2
	Q3, Q4 or Q5	956	81.8	812	91	1147	88.3	1321	88.4
National IMD Quintile ⁶	Q1 or Q2	539	75.7	467	87.8	774	83.6	802	86.4
	Q3, Q4 or Q5	750	84.5	632	92.4	847	88.4	932	90.4
Ethnicity	White	535	86.4	543	93.4	618	87.5	589	93.7
	BAME	917	72.4	810	84.3	1303	81.4	1065	85.4
	Black	131	72.5	123	82.1	213	76.5	180	80.0
	Asian	707	72.6	617	84.6	986	82.3	865	87.1
	Other	79	70.9	70	85.7	104	82.7	104	92.0
Disabled	Yes	73	76.7	88	90.9	149	85.9	171	87.7
	No	1602	77.0	1329	87.4	1802	82.7	1784	87.6
Sex	Male	837	72.2	646	85	963	80.4	882	83.8
	Female	838	81.7	771	89.9	988	85.5	1073	91.0

Table 1. Percentages of degrees classified as 1st or 2:1 split by year and student demographics. Note that the totals in the different categories do not always match the overall total; this is because of missing or unknown information for some students, including where some students are not assigned to a category (e.g. POLAR quintile). In addition, for the ethnicity category, students are counted in the superordinate BAME category, as well as in other Black, Asian and Other.

2 Assessment and marking practices

The University's Credit and Qualifications Framework sets standard requirements for its awards that are consistent with national qualification frameworks. Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies' (PSRB) educational standards and QAA Subject Benchmark Statements are considered as part of programme design and development, and at annual review; Programme Directors review the currency of programmes in light of developments in research, professional and industry practice, the national Framework for HE qualifications and Subject Benchmarks. From 2020-21, the University has adopted the new QAA outcome classification descriptors for Level 6. As part of its continuous improvement, the University has reviewed the amount of assessment that students undertake and found some variability. As a result a more consistent assessment load has been introduced across the institution and this is monitored via our annual review processes.

66.5% of our students are on undergraduate programmes accredited by PSRBs; this represents an additional mark of quality and ensures that our students are prepared well for their future professions. The University utilises external experts, patients for health programmes, and other relevant stakeholder groups to assure the quality of its programme content, assessments and marking. This includes external involvement in programme design, approval and review, and as members of industry advisory boards.

⁴ Young students are considered to be under 21 years of age upon entry and mature students over 21 years of age upon entry.

⁵ The POLAR classification places local areas into five quintiles, based on the higher education participation rates of 18 year olds in the locality. Those with the lowest percentages are placed into quintile 1 and are considered to be the most disadvantaged, with quintile 5 having the highest rates

⁶ The Index of Multiple Deprivation, commonly known as the IMD, is the official measure of relative deprivation for small areas in England. Areas falling in quintiles 1 and 2 are considered the most deprived.

Aston University's moderation policy and its generic marking scale guidance are available in its Assessment Policy, and are applicable to all undergraduate and integrated Master's programmes. As part of our ongoing review of policies, we have been keeping our marking guidance under review by the University Learning and Teaching Committee. Together these policies allow our academic staff to be consistent and transparent in their marking and to have a good understanding of the required standards, but also to keep up to date with feedback from our Enabling Team.

A student's final module grade does not depend on just one marker. Moderation by peers (which has recently been reviewed and standardised), and by external examiners are the most common methods by which we are assured that guidelines are adhered to. The University operates the standard UK award classifications, and the comparability of its marking and moderation processes is assured through our network of External Examiners who provide independent, external scrutiny. All External Examiner appointments are approved by within discipline areas and by the University's academic Senate. As part of its annual review, the University recently reviewed its marking policy pertaining to presentational expectations (including for students with disabilities). For example, it now differentiates between expectations for coursework and that for examinations, with students now expected to make full use of technology to ensure the accuracy of their writing. Students have no right of appeal against academic judgement, but can appeal their marks based on procedural irregularities or failure to take into account mitigating circumstances. To ensure consistency, appeals are dealt with centrally.

3 Academic Governance

The quality of programme delivery is assured through peer observation processes, annual and periodic reviews, and regular student and other stakeholder feedback. As part of the University's Annual Evaluation of Taught Programmes and for Periodic (six-yearly) Reviews, Programme Directors are required to review student attainment, including differences in attainment between different student groups. They also comment on final degree results, explain any trends in degree classifications, and have an action plan to change things.

The University has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic quality and standards of its awards are credible and secure, irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them. Where programmes are delivered with a partner organisation, formal agreements are in place and the operation of the programme is regularly monitored and reviewed. The University's Collaborative Provision Strategy Group has specific oversight of collaborative partnerships, and monitors the academic quality of these programmes. This reports into the University's Learning and Teaching Committee, which has oversight of the strategic direction, quality and standards of all taught academic programmes. The External Examiner role for programmes delivered in partnership with other organisations is consistent with the University's approved practices. Boards of Examiners and External Examiners are asked to review the comparability of academic quality and standards between awards made under these partnerships and other University awards.

4 Classification algorithms

The University's approach to award calculation algorithms was approved by the University's Regulation Sub-Committee (RSC) and is publicly accessible. The document, together with the academic Regulations it links to, covers the University's aggregation methods; the weighting of different stages of study; and regulations around condonement and referred or repeat assessments. Links to the academic Regulations are given as a standard insert in all student handbooks and returning students are given the link to Regulations when they re-enrol. The University conducts an annual review of potential effects of changes in regulations on degree outcomes.

In 2014/5, our annual review recognised that there were multiple algorithms in use across the University, so these were replaced with one algorithm, providing a consistent and equitable approach for all students. The effects of the new algorithms on classifications are monitored annually by the University Learning and Teaching Committee. It identified no cause for concern based on four academic years of information from 2013/14 to 2016/17, and noted that it expected an overall reduction in 1st Classifications awarded in 2017/18 as the previous method of borderline promotion was phased out, and the changes made become the only method of borderline promotion for all Schools and students across the University. A relatively **small** percentage of the promotion of borderline candidates could be attributed to the new regulations (around 5% of all promotions). In July 2020, the UKSCQA published a research report on Degree Algorithm practice. Similar to Aston, 73% of HEIs reported using a weighted arithmetic mean of percentage marks (most commonly showing an emphasis on exit velocity).

In terms of resit assessments, students are allowed a maximum of three attempts at any assessment and may not normally resit any module that has already been passed. Modules that need to be resat normally have their mark capped at the pass mark for the module. This is in line with most other institutions (95%) in the UKSCQA research who reported capping resit assessments, with 58% capping the whole module.

5 Teaching practices and learning resources

It is compulsory for all new teaching staff to gain professional recognition against the UK Professional Standards Framework of Advance HE, either through completion of the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice or CPD Scheme: Research Inspired Teaching Excellence, both of which are externally accredited by Advance HE. 72% of staff with teaching in their contracts have this professional recognition, we encourage student-facing professional services staff to undertake it too, and we have a high proportion of Senior and Principal Fellows, all of which we believe contributes to a high level of success amongst our students.

As seen above, the University has taken, and continues to take, positive action to address the gaps in degree outcomes between IMD Qs 1-2 and Qs 3-5, and BAME and non-BAME students at Aston. For example, the BAME outcome gap has shown to be smaller in those students who take placements⁷. Students who attend our Learning Development Centre, which offers a variety of forms of academic support including, for example, study skills, writing and mathematics, have higher attainment than those who have not⁸. These initiatives – and others – are helping to close the BAME attainment gap at Aston University. Effects of such initiatives are measured and evaluated as part of our Access and Participation Plan monitoring.

6 Identifying good practice and actions

The University encourages staff to take up External Examiner positions at other institutions and to identify good practice within our own programmes of study, as well as from elsewhere in the sector. The University has an Education team who work with academic staff across the University to enhance and innovate learning and teaching, and facilitate the sharing of good practice within and between academic disciplines. Our research and analyses of the contribution of the placement year to degree attainment has been disseminated widely and held up as a role model for the sector. We are also proud of our analyses of student outcomes by student demographics, which will be critical in tackling attainment gaps. We will revisit this statement on an annual basis as part of our annual monitoring and APP evaluation to ensure that it remains current.

7 Risks and challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a recent challenge to our degree awarding process, but the approach we adopted took account of the different types of students who study with us. We have made every endeavour to offer suitable alternative assessments which enable students to meet prescribed learning outcomes, taking into consideration factors such as time zone differences and internet connectivity. All assessments were given extensive scrutiny within the institution, and proposals shared and approved by External Examiners. Programme examination boards took account of the need to ensure that students progressed and completed their degrees, while following OfS and QAA guidelines for maintaining quality and standards.

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⁷ Moores, Birdi & Higson (2017). Placement work experience may mitigate lower achievement levels of Black and Asian vs. White students at university. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 8, 10 p. 1518.

⁸ Unpublished internal data.

