

## DEGREE OUTCOME STATEMENT: 2020

### 1. Introduction

Keele University endeavours at all times to secure and enhance the standards and quality of its awards. This Degree Outcome Statement sets out how our awards are meeting national expectations and requirements relating to university degrees. This Statement was endorsed by the University's Council in December 2020 prior to publication. The University intends to review and periodically update this Statement in future years.

### 2. The University's degree classification profile

The table below shows the good degree profile (1<sup>st</sup> class and 2.i) for Keele University overall and by student characteristics during the period under review.

**Table 1 Percentage of Good Degrees Awarded to UK First Degree Students by Academic Year and Student Characteristic<sup>1</sup>**

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
<b>Keele Overall</b>	73.8	73.4	76.8	79.7	79.1
<i>Sector</i>	75.3	76.4	77.9	79.0	78.9
<b><u>Sex</u></b>					
<b>Female</b>	78.0	77.0	80.0	80.0	80.0
<b>Male</b>	67.0	68.0	73.0	79.0	77.0
<b><u>Age</u></b>					
<b>Mature (over 21)</b>	69.0	62.0	62.0	67.0	72.
<b>Young (under 21)</b>	74.5	74.6	78.6	81.5	80.1
<b><u>Disability</u></b>					
<b>Disabled</b>	77.0	65.0	72.0	75.0	76.0
<b>No known disability</b>	73.3	74.9	77.7	80.5	79.8
<b><u>Ethnicity</u></b>					
<b>White</b>	77.0	76.9	79.7	81.3	82.4
<b>Asian</b>	59.0	59.0	67.0	71.0	73.0
<b>Black</b>	50.0	56.0	60.0	67.0	60.0
<b>Mixed</b>	80.0	60.0	65.0	90.0	75.0

<sup>1</sup> The data in this table relates to UK domicile students only. Age split is based on age on entry. Medicine students are not included in the data as medical degrees are not classified. Data is taken from the Office for Student (OfS) [Access & Participation \(APP\) dataset](#) and from [OfS sector analysis of degree classifications](#). The OfS APP dashboard provides further analysis of these data if required, including breakdown by disability and POLAR4/IMD participation quintiles. Data is provided an institution level only, in order to ensure sector comparability. Internal subject-level data is aligned to our organisational structure and not as meaningful to an external audience.

Over many years, Keele has had a significantly lower percentage of good degrees compared to the sector overall. In recent years, the difference between Keele and the sector has progressively reduced. In 2017/18 and 2018/19, Keele's overall percentage of good degrees was within one percentage point of the sector average. This growth in firsts and upper second degree awards can be accounted for through changes in a number of areas designed to improve student outcomes, including an enhancement in the effectiveness, timeliness and thoroughness of assessment and feedback achieved by redesign of assessments, better pre-submission support and more standardised electronic feedback.

We believe the current classification profile also reflects our efforts to enhance the attainment of students from historically lower achieving groups, more recently through measures set out in the University's [Access and Participation Plan](#). By 2019, the gap in good degrees for particular student characteristics was reducing, particularly for ethnicity, disability and gender. The University is committed to targeting further improvements in attainment gaps as part of its Access and Participation Plan. Work to date has resulted in further improvements in 2019/20, which will be reported on in a future iteration of this Statement. The gender gap also has narrowed substantially with significant improvements in the performance of male students.

### **3. Assessment and Marking Practices**

Programmes at Keele undergo detailed academic scrutiny before they are approved for delivery by the University Education Committee. This ensures that the curriculum and learning outcomes, as well as teaching and assessment, reflect best practice in curriculum design and fully align with published national reference points, such as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Qualification Frameworks, and Subject Benchmark Statements. All programmes leading to the recognition by a professional or statutory body also have to fulfil the relevant professional standards prescribed by that body. In its programme approval and review processes, the University ensures that it draws on independent external advice, usually provided by senior academics from other universities.

Assessment strategies at programme and module level are formulated to ensure that the academic standards for the award are set and maintained at the appropriate level and that student performance is assessed in a way which is reliable and fair. In their annual reports, the University's external examiners confirm that the standards set for our awards are appropriate, student performance comparable with similar programmes they were familiar with, that students are given the opportunity to achieve beyond the threshold standards and that the processes for assessment, examination and determination of awards are sound and fairly conducted.

In order to ensure the full use of the whole marking scale and to increase comparability across subject disciplines, in 2017/18 the University introduced a step marking scale. This provided greater assurance to the University regarding the consistency across subjects in their approaches to marking. The scale was introduced incrementally over two years and it applied to both Level 5 and Level 6 for the first time in 2018/19. At the time, the introduction of the step marking scale led, as anticipated, to a small uplift in good degree outcomes but this was deemed acceptable in light of Keele having historically awarded fewer good degrees in comparison to sector averages. As the grade marking process has now been fully implemented across the levels contributing to the degree classification, the University does not expect any further increase in good degrees stemming from the step marking process.

Assessment and reassessment rules have remained largely stable over the period under review. At Keele, students are allowed one further assessment attempt if they fail a module although the mark for such a reassessment is then capped at the pass mark. Students who can demonstrate that they have been impacted by exceptional extenuating circumstances (ECs, also sometimes known as mitigating circumstances) during the assessment may be allowed a further uncapped attempt. Keele

has seen a significant increase in EC claims in the period under review, particularly in relation to mental health issues. The University is following good practice guidance from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) in supporting students who are experiencing such problems and in its consideration of such EC claims. The majority of EC claims (81% in 2016/17 and 77% in 2017/18) are upheld. In recent years we have, in response to new OIA guidance, reduced the evidence burden for students claiming ECs for mental health issues. This has meant that students appear now to be more willing to come forward and disclose their circumstances. The subsequent uncapping of their reassessments will have contributed to the increase in the percentage of good degrees although it is not possible to quantify this.

The University has increased its support for students with disabilities and enhanced its services assisting students across a broad range of assessment issues. This has helped to ensure that students with disabilities are better able to achieve their full potential, and has reduced the attainment gap for these students.

On the majority of degree programmes, Keele does allow students to receive credit for a small volume of marginal fails (up to a maximum of 30 credits across Levels 4 and 5, and up to 30 credits at Level 6). This condonement allows students to progress through their studies and achieve a degree award but has no significant impact on the percentage of good degrees as the true mark for any condoned module at Level 5 or 6 is included in the calculation for the award classification. Keele is rigorous in not allowing any discounting of marks when calculating the degree classification. There are a very limited number of programmes where due to the nature of the subject, and depending on a student's mark profile and strict rules, a student may be awarded credits despite a module failure, where this failure is balanced by strong performance in a related module or modules. This 'compensation' approach was developed to ensure that students in specified subject areas were not unfairly disadvantaged by the institutional degree algorithm. It is not considered to have impacted on the University's degree classification profile.

#### **4. Academic Governance**

The Senate is the University's highest academic decision-making body. It is supported by a range of sub committees including the Education Committee and the Quality and Academic Standards Sub Committee. The University Examination Board also reports to the Senate. Annually, the Senate and its committees receive reports on student outcomes, student metrics linked to student attainment, as well as reports on the prevalence and outcomes of academic appeals and academic misconduct cases. The Education Policy Sub-Committee oversees the continued appropriateness and fairness of our academic regulations and advises Education Committee on any proposed regulation changes or additions prior to their approval by the Senate. Assessment regulations and policies, including those covering academic misconduct and appeals, are periodically reviewed, and proactive monitoring and intervention help safeguard standards. A large-scale regulation review project was completed in 2019. This way Senate assures itself that appropriate rules are in place to govern the University's academic provision. All strategies, regulations, policies and key procedures are brought together and made available online to the University community in the institutional [Policy Zone](#). Quality assurance procedures, which are regularly reviewed and updated, are published on the webpages of the [Quality Assurance team](#).

There is a high level of externality to oversee the University's awarding practices: all undergraduate taught programmes in the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences and of Natural Sciences have their awards agreed by the main University Examination Board which is chaired by the Pro Vice Chancellor (Education) with representatives from all subjects and which is attended by University Chief External Examiner who is appointed by the Senate.

External examiners are appointed for each programme and are key to the quality assurance process. External examiners are typically senior academics experienced in assessment, curriculum design, and enhancement of the student experience. The University provides central- and subject-based training for its external examiners. A summary and overview of external examiner reports is provided annually to Senate. Many Keele staff also act themselves as external examiners and panel members at other institutions, are active members of their professional bodies (PSRBs) or hold fellowship of AdvanceHE, all of which ensures that Keele staff develop a good awareness of external reference points and subject benchmarking.

Keele's external examiners in general are very supportive of our approaches to marking, moderation and awarding as evidenced in our external examiner reports. The overview reports of external examiner findings and recommendations are discussed in Faculties, at the University Education Committee and by the Senate.

All discipline examination boards are overseen by at least one external examiner who as a subject specialist is able to confirm that the assessment criteria used and the standards which students achieve reflect sector expectations and the relevant national reference points and professional body requirements (where applicable). The University periodically undertakes reviews of the operation of its examination boards. The last main review of the University's examination board regulations, conventions and structures was carried out in 2015 on behalf of the University Senate.

## 5. Classification Algorithms

The University's degree algorithms and progression rules for taught programmes are published on the University's website as part of the [University regulatory framework](#) and set out the way the University classifies its awards for taught programmes clearly for students and staff.

The last comprehensive review of the University's degree algorithm took place in 2013. The 2013 review focused on feedback from a number of external examiners around both the average mark thresholds required to obtain each classification and also the number of credits required to be awarded a degree award. Extensive modelling, sector scanning and consultation was undertaken before a proposal to substantially revise the degree algorithm was submitted to the University Senate. Senate approved the revised algorithm on the basis that brought the University more in line with sector practice. It resolved to monitor carefully the impact on student outcomes of the new classification method, to promote greater consistency across disciplines in the full use of marking scales, and to target attainment gaps for international, BAME and disabled students.

The revised algorithm introduced in 2013 represented a significant tightening up of algorithmic rules. The number of reassessment attempts allowed on a module was also reduced from two to one. The main changes from the old algorithm were that:

- To obtain a higher classification based upon achieving a minimum number of credits in that classification, the average mark obtained must be no less than three percentage points below the normally required average mark (e.g. to obtain a first class degree, a minimum average mark of 67 must be achieved)
- A student must be awarded all 360 credits to obtain a degree award. This can include up to 60 credits of condoned modules, where a mark of between 30 and 39 has been achieved.

The algorithm has two strands which means that the mark profile of a student is taken through a two-step process to consider the final degree classification:

- A first strand requiring the normal average mark to obtain a classification (e.g. a minimum average mark of 70 to obtain a first-class degree);
- A second strand allowing a student to be awarded a higher classification with a lower average mark, provided they achieve a minimum number of credits in the higher class (e.g. to obtain a first class degree, a minimum average mark of 67 and at least 60 Level 6 credits

all gained from modules with a mark of 70 or higher). The second strand applies to 1<sup>st</sup>, 2:1 and 2:2 classifications, but not to 3<sup>rd</sup> class degrees.

For degree programmes where it is not possible to use the University's main algorithm, for example for integrated masters programmes that include a further level of study or for those programmes that use a single 120-credit module per level of study, alternative algorithms are used which are based on the same principles. Further detail is available on the [Keele Quality Assurance website](#).

Historically, examination boards at Keele University have been able to exercise a degree of discretion in the consideration of degree classifications where students are at the borderline between two degree classes. Following the 2013 review, a revised rule was introduced which identified automatically all students as borderline who in Strand 1 of the algorithm had a mark of boundary -2 (which for a 1st class degree, is a weighted average of 68%). The borderline rule allowed exam boards to consider such candidates and decide on whether or not to award the high class of degree without the need to achieve at least 60 Level 6 credits in the higher class. The University provides a set of clear criteria to guide examination boards in their consideration of borderline candidates. This allows a small number of students (typically around 4% of the cohort) to be considered at the examination board to determine whether there is a strong rationale for awarding the student the higher classification. Where such a rationale can be evidenced, for example exceptionally strong performance in the dissertation, then the examination board can agree that the higher classification is awarded. Typically, just over half of the students identified as borderline have their classification raised to the higher class. The current, more stringent degree algorithm was introduced following close liaison with external examiners and ensured that Keele aligned more closely with our benchmark institutions.

The University recognises that since its last algorithm review, it has become less common to allow discretionary decision making around the classification of awards and also to have both a second strand to the algorithm and a borderline rule. In light of emerging sector guidance, the University will consider these features of its classification practices in the next review of its algorithm.

## **6. Teaching Practices and Learning Resources**

Over the period of this review, there have been a number of developments in how we ensure excellence in education practice and improve outcomes for all of our students at the individual and cohort levels. These interventions have had a positive impact on student performance.

In 2012, Keele introduced a Student Learning Team which helped students develop their academic writing skills. This support was integrated into many programmes as well as offered as one to one support for students who were struggling. This work has continued with the establishment of the Keele Institute for Innovation and Teaching Excellence (KIITE) which brought together teams of expert colleagues to support academic development, student learning, learning technology, employer engagement and employability with the aim of improving education practice and students success for all. KIITE acts as a community of innovation and a showcase for the distinctiveness of the University's educational offer.

In 2014, there was a comprehensive institutional review of assessment using the [Transforming Students' Experience of Assessment \(TESTA\) framework](#). This led to a more diverse range of assessment types being adopted across programmes, allowing students to demonstrate their learning through a broader range of assessment activities than previously. There has been a continued move away from traditional examinations towards more authentic assessments which allow students to preserve legacies of their work, visible to employers and external stakeholders. In parallel, the University has enhanced its guidance to academic staff on inclusive learning and teaching approaches and staff are being supported by a range of workshops to help implement this approach.

In 2017, Keele was awarded TEF Gold. Amongst other commendations, the Panel noted that Keele had made significant investment in physical and digital resources in learning technology and teaching spaces, and offered outstanding levels of student engagement and effective support, with a wealth of opportunities beyond the curriculum, including study abroad and volunteering programmes

The University closely monitors its education-related performance metrics at Programme and School level. The promotion of an evidence-based approach to improvements in education practice, and improving student outcomes is firmly established and used particularly strongly in the monitoring of progress against the University's Access and Participation Plan.

## **7. Identifying Good Practice and Actions**

The University is confident that its thoughtful, reflective and self-critical approach to the setting and maintenance of academic standards is also reflected in the culture of continuous enhancement of its portfolio of programmes and their delivery. Many enhancements achieved over recent years have been the result of cross-faculty projects and initiatives, achieved by working in partnership with student bodies, professional services, external peers and statutory and regulatory organisations.

The 'root and branch' review of our assessment regulations which included the establishment of university-wide Assessment Principles in 2018 is an example of the type of project which has transformed and simplified the University's approach to assessment across its range of subjects.

Keele's Senate has been advised by the University's Chief External Examiner, who is a Pro Vice-Chancellor at a Russell Group university. Their advice and expertise have encouraged the University to press ahead with strategies to address its awarding gaps and informed awarding practices and the revision of exam board conventions.

An increasingly sophisticated approach to the use of metrics, such as that generated for the TEF, to understand student outcomes allows the University to continue to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student body and to continue to achieve excellence in learning and teaching resulting in excellent student outcomes, benchmarked appropriately against national degree standards.

## **8. Risks and Challenges**

The University is confident that the standards of its academic awards are high and in line with national expectations. Its awarding practices are commended by external examiners and supported by robust and self-critical reflection at all levels of the University. As a result, Keele is confident that its graduates are emerging with an award which is fair and accurately reflects their academic achievement. That notwithstanding, the University recognises that the emergence of national guidance on principles to guide classification rules and awarding practices of providers make it appropriate to conduct reviews of our own practices periodically, and to begin with review at the earliest opportunity which will focus not only on the degree algorithms themselves but also on associated practices, including exam board conventions, step marking criteria and mark rounding.