

DEGREE OUTCOME STATEMENT: 2021 ¹

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. The first Degree Outcome Statement was endorsed by the University’s Council in December 2020 prior to publication and it is being revised annually. This updated statement was approved by the University Education Committee at its meeting on 16 February 2022.

2. The University’s degree classification profile

The table below shows the good degree profile (1st 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 Characteristic²

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Keele Overall	73	77	80	79	81
<i>Sector</i>	76	78	79	79	84
<u>Sex</u>					
Female	77	80	80	80	81
Male	68	73	79	77	81
<u>Age</u>					
Mature (over 21)	62	62	67	72	70
Young (under 21)	75	79	82	80	83
<u>Disability</u>					
Disabled	65	72	75	76	81
No known disability	75	78	81	80	81
<u>Ethnicity</u>					
White	77	80	81	82	82
Asian	59	67	71	73	82
Black	56	60	67	60	75
Mixed	60	65	90	75	69

¹ This revised version of the Degree Outcome Statement for 2021 is due to be endorsed by the University’s Council at its next meeting.

² 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.

Although still 3 percentage points below the sector average for good degrees in 2019/20, over the 5-year period Keele has moved closer to the sector percentage for Good Degrees. The modest growth at Keele in firsts and upper second class 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](#). The gaps in good degrees by sex, disability and ethnicity all reduced substantially in 2019/20. The University is committed to targeting further improvements in attainment gaps as part of its Access and Participation Plan without putting academic standards at risk.

The academic year 2019/20 was the first to see the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to degree classifications. Keele, like all HEIs in the sector, considered carefully what measures to put in place to mitigate the effects of the country going into lockdown in March 2020. Following discussion and consultation, the Senate of the University agreed a temporary amendment to the degree classification calculation method. All students who were undertaking study contributing to their degree classification at the time would be classified according to the better of two calculations: the original degree calculation method and then an alternative calculation which disregards marks achieved in the summer semester 2020 and is based on 3 semesters of study instead of 4.

In 2020, there were only a total of 50 students who got a higher degree owing to the additional calculation method, out of which only 18 would not have been eligible for a 'good degree' (1st class or 2:2) anyway. This was out of 1,446 students who were considered at the Final University Examination Board.

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.

In the academic year 2019/20, the national lockdown which started in March 2020 and subsequent social distancing requirements meant that many traditional assessment methods, such as most in-situ examinations, had to be suspended and replaced, for the summer semester 2020, by alternative assessment methods such as coursework or online assessments. A trend to move away from the traditional examination had previously been discussed and encouraged for pedagogic reasons but not widely implemented at the University. The pandemic allowed all subject areas, apart from a small number of exempted professional programmes, to pilot other methods of assessment and their suitability to replace all or some traditional in situ examinations. This development was widely welcomed by students and results demonstrated that a non-examination-based assessment diet helped close the attainment gap between students of varied characteristics.

While the methods have begun to change, the rules governing assessment and reassessment on the other hand 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 each year 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 and for all circumstances during the pandemic. 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 volume of ECs brought forward remains significant and the Senate approved a number of operational changes to improving the effectiveness of the EC process with the aim of reducing the burden of processing such claims.

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 but both of these practices have been reviewed during the last academic year and Senate has decided to tighten the margin allowed for condonable fails and to remove the facility of compensating modules altogether. This will be brought in from the academic year 2022/23.

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. During the pandemic, external examiners have been consulted about proposed safety net measures and invited to comment on their impact in their annual reports. The vast majority of external examiners have been hugely supportive of the measures put in place by the University, finding them appropriate, well considered and effective in mitigating the impact of the pandemic on students.

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. During 2020 for the first time, all examination boards were conducted online, a move which proved so successful that it has now been adopted for the future.

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 University undertook a comprehensive review of its degree algorithm in the early part of 2021 to ensure it remained in line with external reference points and reflected sector good practice.

The University recognised 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 reconsidered these features of its classification practices a number of other aspects of its algorithm. The review resulted in a set of proposals to the University Senate. This included the removal of discretionary borderline decision-making and a tightening up of classification boundaries. The proposals will apply to new undergraduate students embarking on their studies at Keele from September 2022.

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.

Keele has a well-established Keele Institute for Innovation and Teaching Excellence (KIITE) which brings 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 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. 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. Their input was also invaluable when mitigation and safety net measures were discussed in relation to Covid-19.

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. The newly agreed changes to the University degree algorithm, the tightening of the rules around module condonement and the removal of the option to compensate modules should provide assurance that the University continuously strives to reflect on rules and regulations which underpin its awarding practices. That notwithstanding, the University recognises that further reflections will further strengthen this approach and has committed itself to reviews of associated assessment practices, including exam board conventions, step marking criteria and its approach to academic integrity in light of rapidly changing technology and commercial providers in this area.