University of Essex Degree Outcomes Statement
January 2024

Institutional degree classification profile

1. We pride ourselves on our commitment to educational excellence and placing student success at the heart of our mission. As part of our commitment to maintaining robust academic standards and a high-quality student experience, we analyse our student outcomes every year and the outcomes are scrutinised by our Education Committee.

2. In the period 2018 - 2022 we saw an average of 79.7% good honours attainment (1st and 2:1 degree classifications), which is in line with the sector average of 79.4%, based on data published by HESA. The percentage of 1st class awards increased from 31.1% in 2019 to 39.3% in 2020 and has since decreased to 34.4%, reflecting sector changes across this period.

3. In 2020, due to the pandemic, alternative methods of assessment were approved which students could complete remotely. The University's Force Majeure Regulation was updated to cover matters relating to academic assessment and progression, and a 'no detriment' policy was adopted to ensure that no student would be unfairly disadvantaged. In 2022 the 'No Detriment' approach to student outcomes ceased. The lessons learned from this emergency measure are now embedded in existing assessment and marking policies. Academic year 2022-23 saw our first year returning to invigilated in-person exams following the pandemic and the operation of our new open-book exam policy.

Figure 1: Good honours degrees (1st and 2:1 classification)

Grey: % Essex Good Honours, Pink: % Sector Good Honours
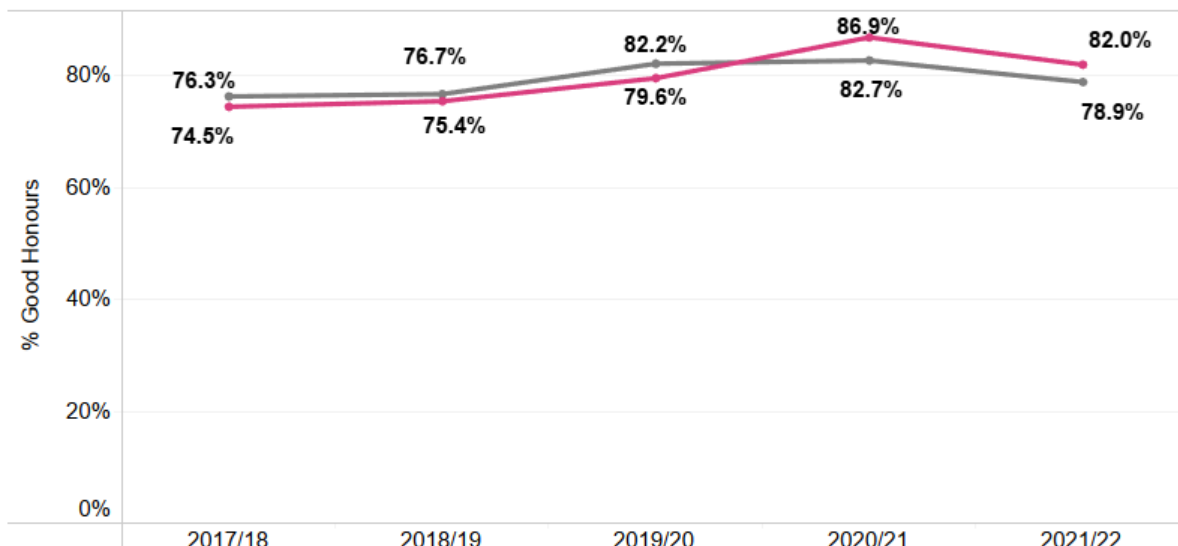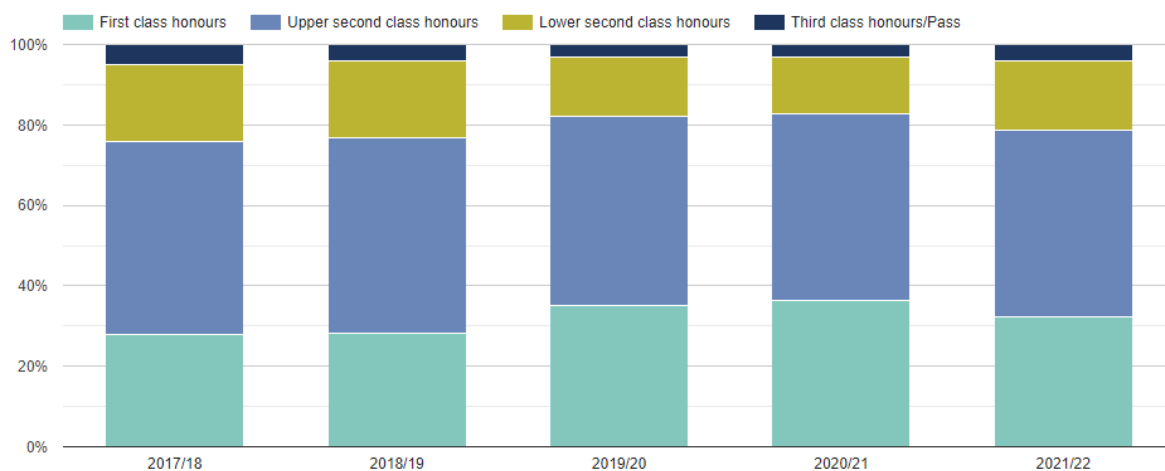
Data source: HESA

Figure 2: Percentage of first-degree qualifiers obtaining each classification

Data source: HESA

Subject mix

4. The pattern of degree classification continues to stay fairly even across all subject areas but there are specific differences in two of our departments – our East 15 Acting School typically delivers over 99% good honours degrees, whilst figures for our School of Health and Social Care (which includes Nursing) average at 63%. These variances are reflective of the sector norms for the subject areas represented.

Student characteristics

5. We welcome students on the basis of their potential and analysis of our data shows that students from backgrounds with lower rates of participation in higher education often perform better than the national average with respect to earning good degrees. We have set an institutional target to reduce all outcome gaps, and our commitment to tackling this is set out in our Access and Participation Plan.

6. Our approach to assessment during the pandemic resulted in an increase in the proportion of good honours awarded to black students and to students from less well-off backgrounds (as reflected in IMD* data). Evidence suggests an emphasis on assessing high level skills such as analysis and problem solving over just testing a student's memory supported the closure of attainment gaps and this continues to be our preferred method of assessment.

IMD *is an acronym which stands for The Index of Multiple Deprivation. IMD is the official measure of relative deprivation for small areas (or neighbourhoods) in England and this data is split into 5 (quintiles) referred to as Q1-Q5. Q1 represents the most deprived area and Q5 represents the least deprived area.*

Figure 3: Good honours degrees by student characteristic

The rate of good honours awarded, of those with an honours degree awarded split by characteristics

Characteristic		2018-19		2019-20		2020-21		2021-22		2022-23	
		%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
University		77.3%	2214	82.2%	2569	87.3%	3178	81.4%	2943	80.3%	2977
AGE	**Mature**	71.7%	236	75.0%	303	77.4%	277	77.5%	327	77.8%	502
	Young	78.0%	1978	83.3%	2266	88.4%	2901	81.9%	2616	80.8%	2475
DISABILITY	**Declared**	78.0%	213	82.8%	279	88.7%	370	80.5%	347	82.2%	366
	No Declared Disability	77.2%	2001	82.1%	2290	87.1%	2808	81.5%	2596	80.0%	2611
SEX	**Female**	80.2%	1248	83.2%	1391	88.3%	1660	82.4%	1613	82.6%	1723
	Male	73.9%	966	81.0%	1176	86.3%	1511	80.1%	1327	77.2%	1249
ETHNICITY	**Arab**	70.0%	21	77.5%	31	88.9%	40	76.3%	45	72.0%	36
	Asian	72.0%	457	83.0%	509	87.6%	809	81.7%	683	81.6%	792
	Black	62.7%	271	74.7%	423	81.0%	456	71.5%	446	68.0%	413
	Mixed	73.4%	102	82.7%	139	85.9%	152	85.1%	165	85.6%	161
	Other	80.4%	37	81.1%	43	81.1%	43	78.8%	52	79.6%	43
	White	84.3%	1275	84.6%	1367	89.4%	1599	84.4%	1476	83.6%	1470
IMD	**Q1**	69.6%	234	76.8%	314	83.5%	374	72.5%	325	70.3%	281
	Q5	83.8%	316	85.4%	338	93.8%	425	87.4%	368	83.7%	354

7. Our <u>Marking Policy</u> sets out the ways in which the various forms of assessment are carried out at Essex, and the processes for moderation and marks reconciliation to support consistency. This information is also provided at a departmental level via the <u>Student Handbooks</u>, which are issued annually.

8. If students experience circumstances beyond their control which might have an impact on their assessed work, the <u>Extenuating Circumstances Policy</u> is available. Our <u>Academic Appeals Procedure</u> sets out the grounds on which a student can appeal against a decision of the Board of Examiners.

9. In line with all UK HE providers we appoint External Examiners whose <u>role</u> is to review whether:
   - The course meets its stated aims and the curriculum remains current.
   - The assessments and types of assessment in modules are appropriate and of comparable standard to other institutions.
   - The marking has been applied fairly on assignments and the marking scheme/grading criteria have been properly and consistently applied.
   - The assessment process complies with the University of Essex Rules of Assessment and national reference points such as the UK Framework for Higher Education.

10. External Examiners are appointed for each course, including those delivered via our partner institutions, and provide feedback on the assessment process, whether it is properly designed and applied, and whether it is carried out in a way that is fair and equitable to all students, and supportive of the achievement of learning outcomes. Comments from our externals are consistently positive but where specific issues are raised these are responded to swiftly and we use our academic governance arrangements (see below) to assure ourselves that our processes and activities are effective.

Academic governance

11. The detailed institutional analysis of student outcomes and degree classification profiles takes place via our Education Committee, reporting to the University Senate and ultimately to our governing body, Council. In reviewing our degree outcomes, we look at quantitative trends in student degree outcomes over time, including the impact of student demographics, and subject differences. For courses delivered at our partner institutions we consider classification data at our Partnership Committees, and where we have franchise arrangements the outcomes are assessed against comparator data from the home Essex department.

12. The Framework for University of Essex awards applies to all taught provision both within our academic departments and externally at our academic partner institutions and has been aligned with sector recognised standards such as the UK Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). In course approval and review, provision is considered in the light of the FHEQ, subject and qualification benchmark statements, qualification descriptors, and any professional body requirements. Course approval and review panel members are directed to consider qualification descriptors and subject benchmarks in the process of programme approval and review.

13. Feedback from External Examiners (for courses delivered on our home campuses and at our partners) is reviewed at a departmental, faculty and institutional level in order to capture themes and generic issues as well as points specific to each subject. Consolidated reports are considered by our Academic Quality and Standards Committee and reported through to our Education Committee.

14. The review cycle of our annual planning process is aligned with the Annual Review of Courses process and this ensures a strategic and systematic approach to planning and performance monitoring, in support of our students and their education. Our process of five-yearly Periodic Review of our courses, which includes external and student panel members, ensures that our curriculum remains current and provides opportunities for wider sharing of good practice.

15. In the process of assuring the content of this statement we have consulted with staff and student representatives through our Education Committee and Senate. The degree outcomes statement has been formally approved by University Council.

Classification algorithms

16. Our Rules of Assessment for Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate Awards apply to all Departments and Partner institutions. We worked closely with our Students' Union, and with input from staff and student focus groups, to ensure the accessibility of our rules, and to create a model which is directly addressed to the student.

17. The Rules of Assessment are regularly tested both against the analysis of student retention, progression and achievement data at Essex, and against practice across comparator institutions, and we are confident that they are in line with sector norms and principles for effective degree algorithm design.

18. A student's degree class is based upon marks achieved at Level 5 and Level 6, weighted 40 and 60 respectively and combined to give the Degree Mark. A student's final outcome is

thereby derived from their performance across two years, whilst ensuring an element of 'exit velocity' to recognise the growth achieved by their final year.

Figure 4: Degree Classification algorithm

First Class Honours (1)	▪ A Degree Mark of 70 or more; or ▪ 120 credits (from Year Two and Final Year) at 70 or above with a Degree Mark of 68 or 69.
Upper Second Class Honours (2.1)	▪ A Degree Mark of 60 or more; or ▪ 120 credits (from Year Two and Final Year) at 60 or above with a Degree Mark of 58 or 59.
Lower Second Class Honours (2.2)	▪ A Degree Mark of 50 or more; or ▪ 120 credits (from Year Two and Final Year) at 50 or above with a Degree Mark of 48 or 49.
Third Class Honours (3)	▪ Meet the criteria for the award of an Honours degree but without sufficient marks to obtain a Lower Second Class Honours Degree or higher.

19. Other key principles are:

   ▪ Students must pass at least 330 credits, with 90 or more at Level 6, to be awarded a degree. A maximum of 30 credits can be failed (condoned) across the whole degree, but none of them can be core modules.

   ▪ The pass mark is 40 for all modules.

20. Students are permitted three attempts to pass an individual module, however, unless Extenuating Circumstances apply, the module aggregate mark will be capped at 40 after the first attempt.

   ▪ Extenuating Circumstances may mean that a student performs less well than expected or misses assessments. If a student submits Extenuating Circumstances and they are accepted as valid, the Board of Examiners may offer additional assessment opportunities in line with the Extenuating Circumstances Policy and guidelines.

- Some courses have extra requirements that must be met, often to meet the needs of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. These variations to the rules of assessment require approval from University Senate.

Teaching practices and learning resources

21. We are committed to research-led education, enabling our students to develop critical, analytic, and transferable skills. Our Education Strategy sets out our commitment to supporting every student from every background to achieve success, and our ethos of continuous improvement ensures that there has been considerable investment by staff and students in investing in genuine, positive improvements in learning outcomes.

22. We have undertaken a range of initiatives to ensure that our forms of assessment take account of the diversity of prior learning styles with which our students enter university. We help smooth the transition to University-level study by ensuring a variety of methods of assessment while also developing skills, such as independent thinking and critical evaluation associated with university study.

23. Significant developments over the past five years include:

- An increase in the proportion of staff who hold a professional teaching qualification recognised by the UK Professional Standards Framework, and Fellowship of the HEA.
- Our Learner Engagement Activity Portal (LEAP), which has demonstrated a strong link between student engagement and student progression and outcomes, enabling a targeted approach to student learning support
- Enhancement of our Personal Tutor system to embed LEAP data
- Systematic investment in campus facilities with the aim of improving the quality of the student experience and student outcomes
- Developments in learning technologies such as our Listen Again lecture-capture system, and our Moodle VLE

24. Our average of 79.7% good honours attainment over the past five years demonstrates the effectiveness and consistency of our enhancements in teaching practices and learning resources. We continually challenge ourselves to do better and have no room for complacency - our aim is to close outcome gaps where these exist.

Identifying good practice and actions

25. Through our annual planning process, we systematically monitor departmental performance and identify areas of good practice. We interrogate degree outcomes data through Tableau,

our interactive dashboard, in order to better understand performance at an institutional level and within the departmental context. Institution wide access to these dashboards facilitates continuous improvement.

26. Academic skills support is embedded in the curriculum - predominately targeted at first years and focuses on core and transferrable skills including essay writing, research skills, note taking, managing study time, as well as maths, statistics and digital skills. Our Skills for Success team evaluate the impact of academic skills support to ensure that it is helping the delivery of all departmental performance priorities, including the closing of outcome gaps.

Risks and challenges

27. Our Strategic Plan 2019-28 includes a Key Performance Indicator to reduce outcome gaps and our Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25 has specific targets relating to attainment across demographic groups. We are committed to supporting every student from every background to achieve their potential by addressing disparity in outcomes between different groups of students, and embedding equality, diversity and inclusion in the curriculum. Through our Inclusivity Leads in each department, we are developing knowledge and resources to establish inclusive practice and support our commitment to closing our outcome gaps.