

A degree of uncertainty

An investigation into grade inflation in universities

Tom Richmond

June 2018

#reformHE

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the nine Higher Education experts who agreed to be interviewed as part of this project as well as the three external peer reviewers who kindly provided their feedback and comments on draft versions of this report.

The arguments and any errors that remain are the author's and the author's alone.

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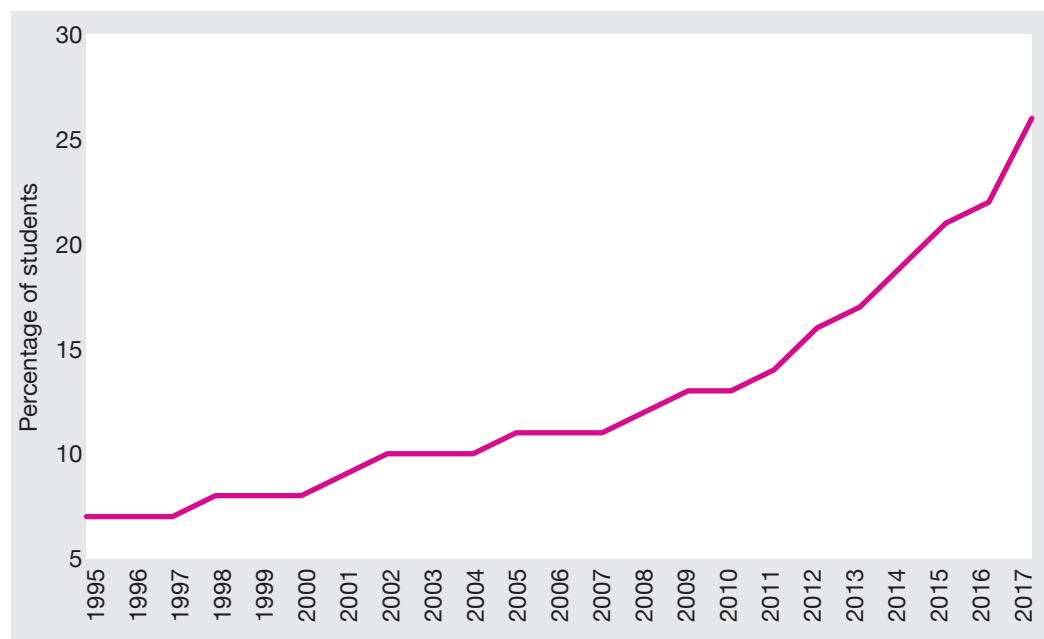
Executive summary

With one-third of 18-year-olds now entering Higher Education (HE) each year, the 'degree classification' (i.e. final grade) awarded to students is arguably more important now than it has ever been. These classifications allow other individuals and organisations to differentiate between graduates in terms of what they have achieved by the end of their degree course. Any sign that the value of degree classifications has diminished over time would therefore be of great concern.

In the mid-1990s there was no detectable 'grade inflation' at all, with 7 per cent of students awarded a First-class honours ('First'), yet the upward trend in Firsts being awarded to students over the last two decades has been unrelenting. From 1997 to 2009 the proportion of Firsts almost doubled from 7 to 13 per cent, and in just seven years since 2010 the proportion of Firsts has doubled again from 13 to 26 per cent (climbing from 22 to 26 per cent in the last year alone).

The percentage of students being awarded a 2:1 has also risen from 40 to 49 per cent since 1995, meaning that the proportion of students awarded either a First or 2:1 has increased from 47 to 75 per cent over this period.

Proportion of students awarded a First for their first undergraduate degree



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Publications (Open Data: Students in Higher Education)*, 2018.

Further analysis revealed the following trends:

- > Of those institutions with more than 1,000 students completing their degree last year, Imperial College London tops the list at 45 per cent of their students being awarded a First, closely followed by the University of Surrey on 44 per cent.
- > There are now 40 institutions (a quarter of all HE providers) that award Firsts to at least 30 per cent of their students.
- > 54 institutions have seen their proportion of Firsts double or triple since 2010 (Southampton Solent University and the University of the West of Scotland even saw their proportion more than quadruple).
- > Seven institutions have seen their proportion of Firsts rise by over 20 percentage points since 2010.
- > Some large institutions still award a relatively small proportion of Firsts. Bath Spa University and the University of Chichester jointly award the lowest proportion at 15 per cent.

What causes grade inflation?

There is considerable evidence to suggest that 'degree algorithms' (which translate the marks achieved by students during their degree into a final classification) are contributing to grade inflation. Approximately half of universities have changed their degree algorithms in the last five years "to ensure that they do not disadvantage students in comparison with those in similar institutions". Research has also identified serious concerns about how these algorithms treat 'borderline' cases where a student's overall mark is close to the boundary of a better degree classification. One expert concluded that "universities are essentially massaging the figures, they are changing the algorithms and putting borderline candidates north of the border".

Similarly, the pressure being placed on academics by senior managers at universities to lower their standards is also strongly implicated in grade inflation. Some academics have chosen to express their concerns publicly, even though this has on occasion put their own career at risk. One cited the "intolerable pressures on academic staff to pass students who should rightfully fail and to award higher classes of degrees to the undeserving", while another complained that they had routinely awarded essays low grades "but have been brought under pressure, internally and externally, to provide higher grades." The sheer volume of similar reports, documented over many years, is concerning and its potential impact on grade inflation is obvious enough.

Several other factors have been cited to explain the inflation, such as the pressure from league tables, greater competition between institutions and a more 'consumerist' attitude from students. However, the inflation itself must be driven by factors that directly translate into universities awarding higher marks such as degree algorithms. Some university leaders have also put forward their own suggestions for what might have caused grade inflation, such as admitting students with higher A-level grades, improvements in teaching quality or students working harder than ever before. However, these are rarely supported by research findings and in any case they are often contradicted by the extent and rate of inflation in recent years.

The inadequacy of current arrangements

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), established in 1997, has conducted regular visits to universities to assess their procedures for monitoring and assuring standards and to make recommendations for improvement, but it has previously admitted that “we do not judge the standards themselves”. The system of ‘external examiners’, who act as moderators for the exam marking carried out at other institutions, has been in place since 1832 but research has found “little evidence to support the view that external examiners are an effective means to safeguard academic standards”.

The incorporation of a grade inflation metric into the ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’ is unlikely to have any substantial impact, given its emphasis on asking universities to ‘justify’ any inflation rather than investigating it themselves. It is also unclear how the new regulator for HE in England – the Office for Students – will prevent grade inflation when it must simultaneously promote greater competition between institutions and protect the autonomy of universities. While competition and autonomy are acceptable goals in themselves, it is essential that HE providers compete and use their autonomy in the right manner. The evidence on grade inflation presented in this report suggests that the competitive landscape in HE has encouraged universities to use their autonomy in the wrong way, to the detriment of students and taxpayers.

A new model to prevent grade inflation

Reform strongly supports the principle of autonomy for education providers and for public service providers more broadly. Universities should operate free from government interference as far as possible. However, autonomy does not mean the absence of accountability, particularly when universities receive £17.7 billion of tuition fee revenue each year. At this time, students have no way of directly comparing the standard of degree courses at different institutions and taxpayers have no way of knowing when and where universities are delivering high-quality provision or value for money.

One of the most significant changes in education policy in recent years has been the movement towards involving ‘end users’ in qualification design and assessment. This report therefore outlines a new system for awarding degrees that delivers a greater role for professional bodies and other similar organisations. The new assessment model will end grade inflation as well as produce consistency and comparability in degree standards through the introduction of a single national assessment for each degree course.

It is in the interests of both students and universities to stop grade inflation. While universities will almost certainly prefer to maintain the status quo, other possible solutions would be far more interventionist and intrusive. The proposals in this report offer a more appropriate balance of autonomy and accountability for HE providers by leaving a large proportion of what they deliver untouched while also allowing students, parents and employers to make more informed decisions about which university and which degree course is right for them.

Recommendations

- 1.** The Office for Students should introduce a new 'condition of registration' that requires all Higher Education providers to only offer undergraduate degree courses that are formally recognised by an external body known as a 'Designated Assessment Body' (DAB).
- 2.** The new DAB would be given the power to set the standards required by all HE providers when offering each degree course and they can refuse to allow a provider to offer a degree course if their standards are not met. The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) should be amended so that the DABs are allowed to specify 'sector-recognised standards'.
- 3.** Each DAB must design a single, national assessment lasting approximately 3-4 hours for each degree course that will be taken by all students studying towards that degree in their final year. This assessment would be worth no more than 10 per cent of the final degree mark for each student.
- 4.** The performance of students at each Higher Education provider on this new assessment will determine the proportions of each degree classification that the provider can award to that cohort of students. The proportion of classifications awarded at a national level for each subject would be: 10 per cent of students awarded a First; 40 per cent awarded a 2:1; 40 per cent awarded a 2:2; and 10 per cent awarded a Third.
- 5.** The Office for Students, supported by the Department for Education, should use the results of the new national assessments for each degree to produce a 'value-added' measure for each university that records the academic progress made by students during their degree course.

Introduction

“We are once again experiencing the ‘winds of change’ in the university sector” said Universities Minister Sam Gyimah in February 2018, noting that “not a single week goes by without a university story being splashed on the front pages”.¹ Media coverage of rising student debt, Vice-Chancellor remuneration packages, strikes over pensions and debates around freedom of speech have all captured the attention of politicians and the general public. That said, accusations of ‘grade inflation’ in Higher Education (HE) is perhaps the most concerning development because it directly relates to both *quality* (i.e. the content and rigour of a degree) and *standards* (i.e. the level of achievement required to reach each degree classification).

Even before the phrase ‘tuition fees’ had entered the education lexicon, two major reports had been commissioned by government in the post-war period that addressed the standard of a university degree as part of their deliberations on the future of HE: the report by the Committee on Higher Education chaired by Lord Robbins (the *Robbins Report*) in 1963 and the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education led by Sir Ronald Dearing (the *Dearing Report*) in 1997. Despite their historical perspective, the relevance of these reports to the challenges facing universities in the present day should not be underestimated.

When the *Robbins Report* was published, there were 118,000 students at universities in Great Britain, with just 4 per cent of each age cohort choosing this route.² The Report stated in its opening pages that “we must demand of a system that it produces as much high excellence as possible” and this was only possible if our HE system was devised so that it “safeguards standards”.³ It also believed that “an autonomous institution should be free to establish and maintain its own standards of competence without reference to any central authority”.⁴ The Report thought that the existing mechanisms in place to promote quality were sufficient, drawing attention to “the obvious incentive to maintain a high place in public esteem” and the use of external examiners that they felt provided “a sufficient safeguard against any serious abuse of this liberty.”⁵

Despite appearing to rule out government intervention on standards in HE, the Report accepted that:

*It is unlikely that separate consideration by independent institutions of their own affairs in their own circumstances will always result in a pattern that is comprehensive and appropriate in relation to the needs of society and the demands of the national economy.*⁶

The Report concluded that “a system that aims at the maximum of independence compatible with the necessary degree of public control is good in itself, as reflecting the ultimate values of a free society.”⁷

After a gap of almost four decades, the then Conservative government decided that another sweeping review of HE was warranted, not least because the number of students in HE had increased five-fold since the *Robbins Report*.⁸ The committee who produced the *Dearing Report* were instructed that one of their main principles must be that “standards of degrees and other higher education qualifications should be at least maintained, and assured”.⁹ The Report acknowledged the responsibilities that had to be

1 Sam Gyimah, ‘A Revolution in Accountability’, Speech, 28 February 2018.

2 Professor Lord Robbins, *The Report Of The Committee On Higher Education* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1963), 15–16.

3 *Ibid.*, 10.

4 *Ibid.*, 231.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 233.

7 *Ibid.*, 230.

8 Ron Dearing, *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1997), 18.

9 *Ibid.*, 3.

shouldered by the HE sector, in that “its commitment to quality and standards will shape its future.”¹⁰ In order to justifiably claim to be ‘world class’, the Report stated that HE institutions had to “safeguard the rigour of its awards”.¹¹

The *Dearing Report* insisted that “students and employers must be able to rely on the value, quality and standards of qualifications.”¹² Worryingly, it found that “many of those giving evidence expressed concerns both about the quality of students’ experiences and about the standards of degrees.”¹³ Moreover, the *Dearing Report* highlighted the growing issue of grade inflation as “there has been a clear trend over time ...for institutions to award an increasing proportion of first and upper second degrees”,¹⁴ which is why many people felt it was not plausible to say standards had not declined. Although the Report was not able to identify the precise causes of the inflation, it was:

*...sensitive to the public concern that exists about standards and to the significant body of opinion in higher education which holds that, at the broad subject level, little precise comparability of standards exists, except perhaps where there is an external validating or accrediting body.*¹⁵

In response to these issues, the *Dearing Report* decided that each HE institution should remain responsible for its own standards and was confident that the existing systems “are among the most rigorous in the world”.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it recognised that “the expansion of student numbers has put the existing quality assurance arrangements under strain” and insisted that diversity in the HE system “is not an excuse for low standards or unacceptable quality.”¹⁷ The *Dearing Report* went to propose more explicit ‘threshold’ (minimum) standards for different degree awards developed in partnership with professional bodies and subject associations.¹⁸ The ‘external examiner’ system was also to be strengthened through the creation of a UK-wide pool of academic staff from which HE institutions had to select examiners (who themselves needed more training and preparation to carry out their duties).¹⁹

The *Dearing Report’s* verdict was that “[universities] must work continually to improve the quality of teaching and they must approach the mutual assurance of standards with real commitment. Anything less would be to sell their students short.”²⁰ The Report added that “new systems for the assurance of quality and standards must be in place and seen to be effective within a short space of time [and] if they are not, the Government will be justified in intervening to protect the interests of students.”²¹

Even though the *Robbins Report* and *Dearing Report* were separated by several decades, the consistency of their message was striking. Both reports agreed that the autonomy of HE institutions was to be cherished and diversity among these institutions was a valuable feature of the HE system. However, the reports qualified these views on the grounds that if HE institutions fail to safeguard standards in curricula and degree awards then government would be justified in intervening to protect the rigour, consistency and fairness of degree courses as well as assuring society of the value of HE more broadly. Moreover, the reports recognised that failing to deliver these safeguards would potentially damage the reputation and standing of HE in this country and abroad.

10 Ibid., 7.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 83.

13 Ibid., 37.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 154.

16 Ibid., 143.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 156–57.

19 Ibid., 162.

20 Ibid., 368.

21 Ibid.

With one-third of 18-year-olds now entering HE,²² the debate over quality and standards has hit the headlines again. Former Universities Minister Jo Johnson said last year that “grade inflation is tearing through [HE]”.²³ He also noted his disappointment that “the sector seems to have made so little progress in tackling this urgent and continuing problem” when he was in no doubt that “we need to stop grade inflation.”²⁴ His conclusion was clear:

*Unchecked, grade inflation will undermine the reputation of the entire UK HE sector, creating a dangerous impression of slipping standards, undermining the efforts of those who work hard for their qualifications and poorly serving the needs of employers.*²⁵

Given the significant inflation in degree outcomes now visible across the HE sector that receives £17.7 billion of taxpayer funding each year in the form of tuition fees,²⁶ the time has come to ask whether universities are able and willing to protect quality and standards both now and in future. This report will begin by analysing grade inflation in the HE sector to observe when, where and why it is occurring. This will be followed by investigating the extent to which the existing mechanisms that are supposed to provide quality assurance in HE can safeguard against lower quality and standards. Finally, the report will offer a set of recommendations designed to deliver a fairer, more transparent and more rigorous system for determining a student’s degree classification that brings grade inflation to an end.

22 Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, ‘Largest Ever Proportion of UK’s 18 Year Olds Entered Higher Education in 2017, UCAS Data Reveals’, Webpage, 27 November 2017.

23 Jo Johnson, ‘Embracing Accountability and Promoting Value for Money in Higher Education’, Speech, 7 September 2017.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Higher Education Statistics Agency, ‘Finances of Higher Education Providers 2016/17’, Webpage, 26 April 2018.

1

Grade inflation in universities

1.1	How much grade inflation has there been?	12
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The system for classifying a degree course in the UK, which has been in place since 1918,²⁷ normally consists of the following possible outcomes along with their approximate range of scores:

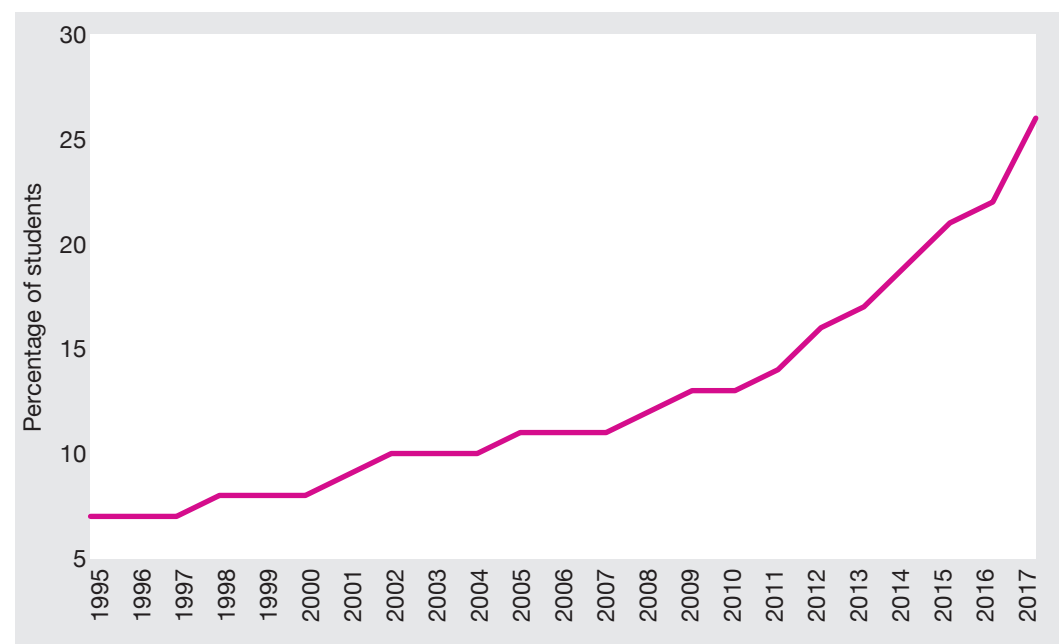
- > First-class honours (1st): 70 per cent or higher
- > Second-class honours – Upper division (2:1): 60–69 per cent
- > Second-class honours – Lower division (2:2): 50–59 per cent
- > Third-class honours (3rd) or a pass: 40–49 per cent

In this chapter, the latest data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) will be used to analyse the distribution of these four classifications for students completing their first undergraduate degree at a UK university. This analysis will illustrate the extent of grade inflation and identify where grade inflation has been most visible in terms of different institutions and subjects.

1.1 How much grade inflation has there been?

As shown in Figure 1 there was no detectable inflation at all in the mid-1990s, with 7 per cent of students awarded a First-class honours ('First') in 1995, 1996 and 1997. This is in line with historical standards, as the average proportion of students awarded a First in 1970 was, again, 7 per cent.²⁸ Since 1997 the percentage of Firsts awarded to students has increased every single year. What's more, the speed at which the percentage of Firsts has risen after 1997 has increased over time. In the twelve years from 1997 to 2009 the proportion of Firsts almost doubled from 7 to 13 per cent, yet in just seven years since 2010 the proportion of Firsts has doubled again from 13 to 26 per cent (climbing from 22 to 26 per cent in the last year alone).

Figure 1: Proportion of students awarded a First for their first undergraduate degree



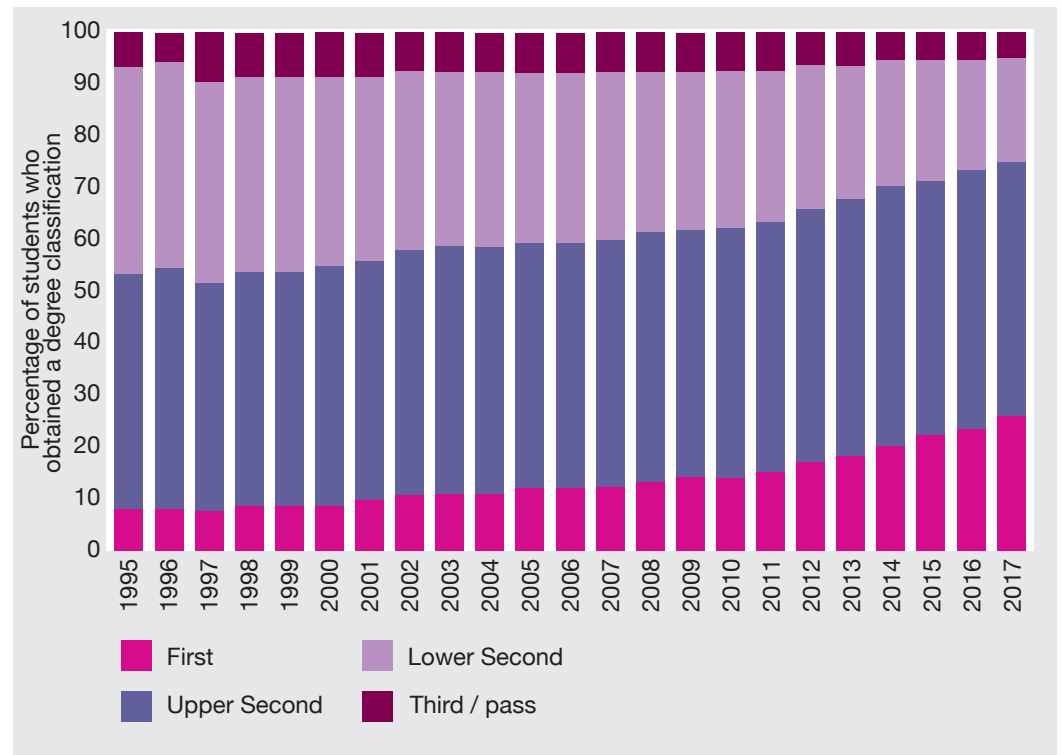
Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Publications (Open Data: Students in Higher Education)*, 2018.

²⁷ Geoffrey Alderman, 'Tear up the Class System', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2003.

²⁸ David Barrett, 'Dumbing down of University Grades Revealed', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 2011.

It is not only the percentage of Firsts that has experienced inflation. Figure 2 shows that percentage of students who obtained a degree classification and were awarded a 2:1 has risen from 40 to 49 per cent since 1995. Consequently, the proportion of students awarded either a First or 2:1 has increased from 47 to 75 per cent over this period. This has led to a significant reduction in the proportion awarded a 2:2 while the proportion of students awarded a 3rd / Pass has remained broadly consistent at around 6-8 per cent.

Figure 2: Proportion of students obtaining each classification for their first degree

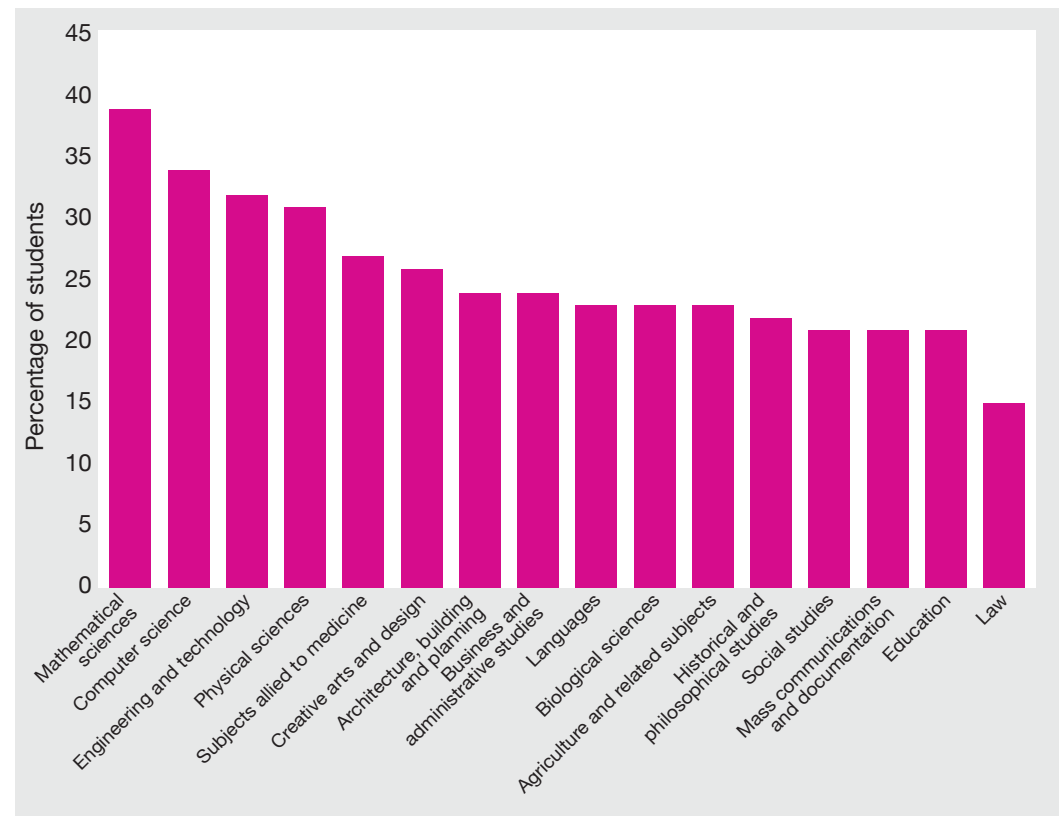


Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Publications (Open Data: Students in Higher Education)*, 2018.

1.2 Grade inflation by subject

Figure 3 demonstrates the considerable variation in the percentage of Firsts awarded across different subject groupings. 'Mathematical Sciences' awards the highest proportion of Firsts at 39 per cent, while 'Law' awards just 15 per cent of degrees as Firsts.²⁹

Figure 3: Proportion of Firsts achieved in different subject groupings in 2016/17



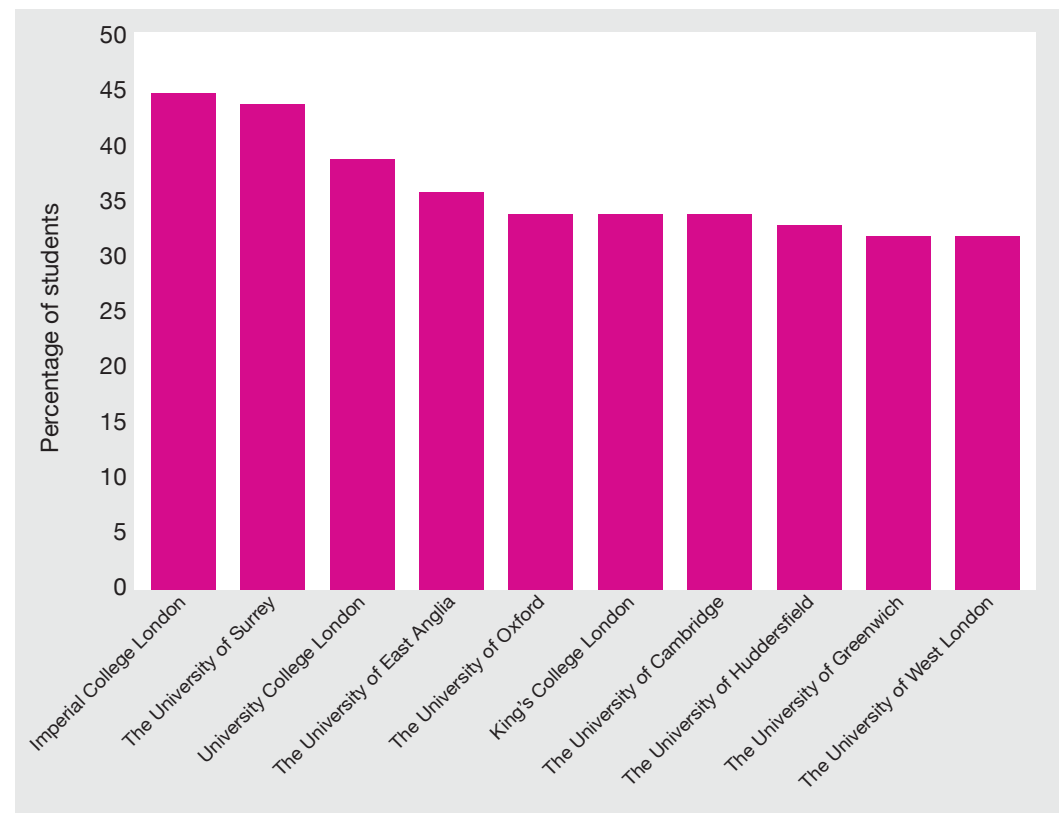
Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Table 17 – HE Qualifiers by Subject of Study and Level of Qualification Obtained 2016/17, 2018.*

²⁹ Medicine & Dentistry and Veterinary Science were excluded from this analysis because over 80% of students are simply awarded a 'Pass' or 'Fail' for their degree course, which would have distorted the comparison. 'Combined' courses that cover a range of subjects, such as modular courses offered by The Open University, were also excluded for simplicity.

1.3 Grade inflation by institution

In terms of the differences between institutions, the variations are even greater still. The Royal Academy of Music awards the highest proportion of Firsts across all HE institutions at 71 per cent.³⁰ However, with only 90 students graduating in 2016/17 it is not sensible to compare such small specialist institutions with larger HE providers. Figure 4 shows the institutions with more than 1,000 students completing their degree in 2016/17 that awarded the highest percentage of Firsts. Imperial College London tops the list at 45 per cent, closely followed by the University of Surrey on 44 per cent.

Figure 4: Institutions awarding the highest proportion of Firsts in 2016/17

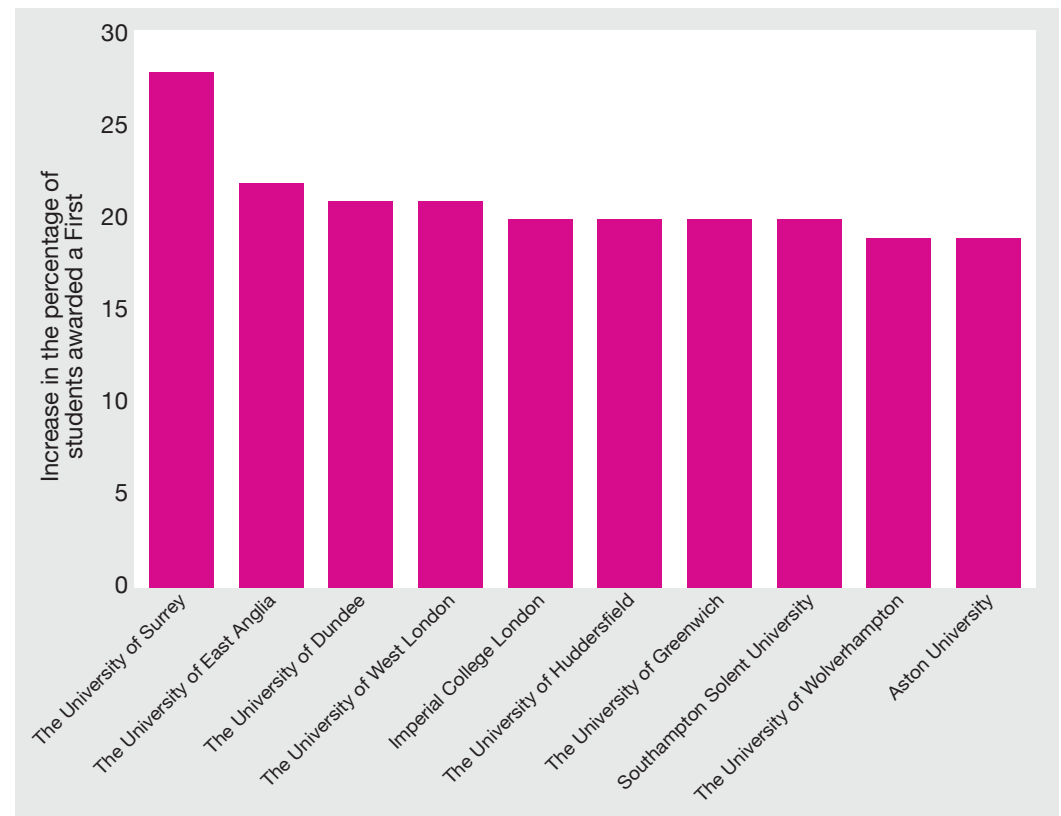


Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Table 16 – HE Qualifiers by HE Provider and Level of Qualification Obtained 2016/17, 2018.*

³⁰ Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Table 16 – HE Qualifiers by HE Provider and Level of Qualification Obtained 2016/17', Webpage, February 2018.

Not only are there now 40 institutions that award Firsts to at least 30 per cent of their students, the rate at which the proportion of Firsts has increased at some institutions is noteworthy. As shown in Figure 5, seven institutions have seen a rise of over 20 percentage points in the proportion of Firsts awarded from 2010 to 2017. Across the HE sector, 54 institutions have seen their proportion of Firsts at least double over this period. Eight of the ten organisations shown in Figure 5 saw their proportion of Firsts approximately triple. Southampton Solent University has even seen their proportion more than quadruple since 2010 from 6 to 26 per cent.

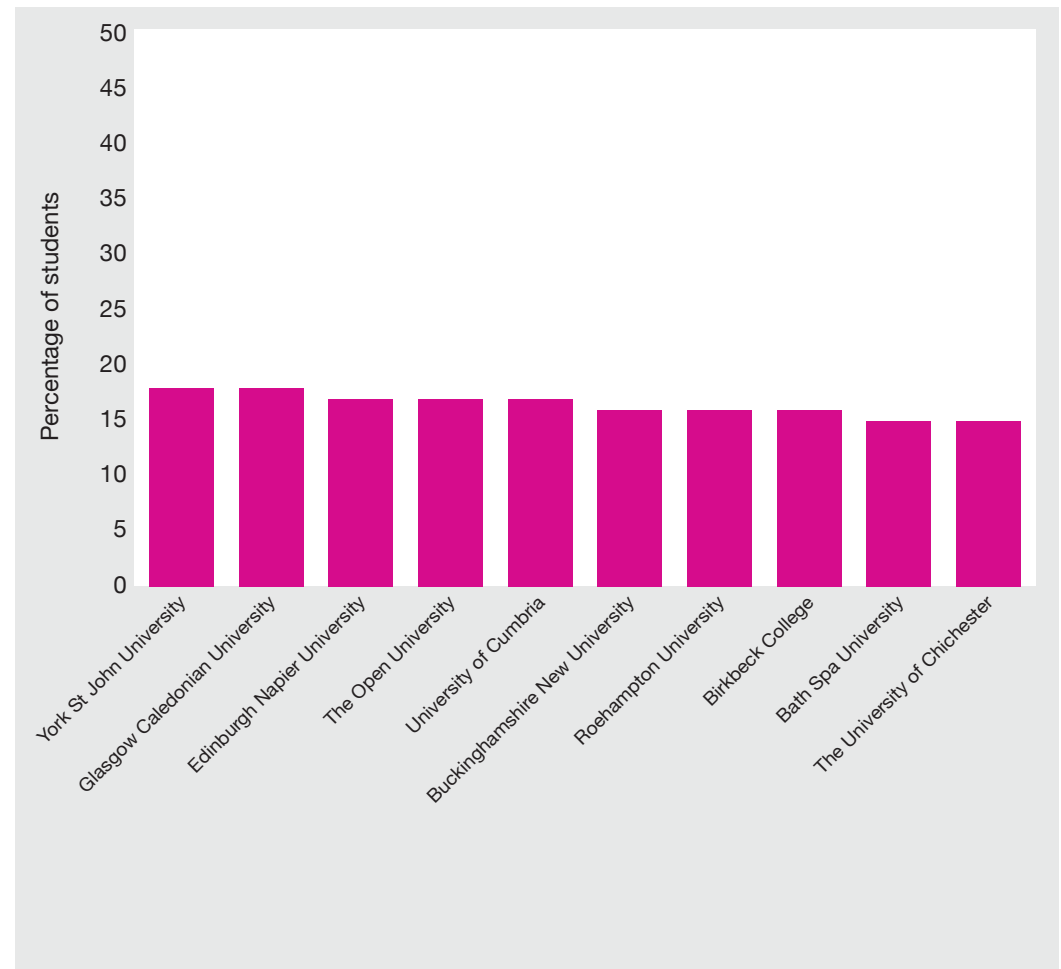
Figure 5: Institutions with the largest increase in the proportion of Firsts from 2009/10 to 2016/17



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Table 16 – HE Qualifiers by HE Provider and Level of Qualification Obtained 2016/17, 2018*; Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Publications (Open Data: Students in Higher Education)*, 2010.

There are, however, a number of large institutions that did not follow the same trend (Figure 6). 23 HE providers awarded Firsts to 20 per cent or fewer of their students last year, with Bath Spa University and the University of Chichester jointly awarding the lowest proportion at 15 per cent. The Open University, which is the largest provider of HE in the country with over 12,000 students a year, awarded a relatively small proportion of Firsts as well.

Figure 6: Institutions awarding the lowest proportion of Firsts in 2016/17



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Table 16 – HE Qualifiers by HE Provider and Level of Qualification Obtained 2016/17, 2018.*

2

What might be causing grade inflation?

2.1	Students and their courses	20
2.2	Degree algorithms	22
2.3	Lower standards	23

Given how long grade inflation has been visible in HE, it has received surprising little political attention. There has only been one notable investigation over the past two decades, which came in the form of a report by the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee in 2009.³¹ The Committee was not impressed with the vagueness of the responses they received from Universities UK (UUK), an advocacy organisation for universities, and other sector representatives when questioned about degree outcomes and standards, branding them “simplistic and unsatisfactory”.³² The Committee also “found no appetite within the higher education sector for a systematic analysis of the reasons for the increase in the proportion of first and upper second honours degrees.”³³

Pressure on universities comes in many forms. The volume of students across all forms of HE has risen from 216,000 at the time of the *Robbins Report*³⁴ to over 2.3 million in 2016/17,³⁵ which has placed a greater burden on universities to maintain standards. Moreover, students rightly expect HE providers to provide a high-quality education, especially when over half of students now identify themselves as a ‘customer’ of their university.³⁶ This links to students’ desire to achieve good results, knowing that many employers use the achievement of a 2:1 to filter applicants at some stage in their recruitment process.³⁷

In this context, league tables are often associated with grade inflation. Jo Johnson commented last year that “I understand that the incentives on individual providers to award more 2:1s and firsts are strong [as] the proportion of ‘good degrees’ counts towards performance in league tables”.³⁸ Blaming league tables is intuitively appealing as universities compete with each other for students and must therefore make themselves attractive to potential applicants. Professor Alan Smithers at Buckingham University said recently that “universities have been chasing league table positions and have behaved disgracefully” with regard to grade inflation.³⁹ Even so, the league table published by *The Times* newspaper has been in place since 1992,⁴⁰ yet the current spell of inflation only began in 1998. Moreover, the continued presence of league tables cannot explain why the rate of increase in the proportion of Firsts has risen during this period – most notably in the doubling of the proportion of Firsts from 2010 to 2017.

Tuition fees are another frequently cited factor. As shown in Figure 7, the emergence of grade inflation coincided with the announcement of £1,000 tuition fees in 1998, as did the uptick in inflation in 2004 when tuition fees rose for a second time to £3,000.⁴¹ The sharp increase in the pace of inflation since 2010 also coincides with tuition fees rising to £9,000.⁴² Establishing causality is problematic, yet the correlational evidence suggests that when tuition fees rise, so does the proportion of top degree outcomes.

31 House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, *Students and Universities: Eleventh Report of Session 2008–09*, HC 170-I (London: The Stationery Office, 2009).

32 *Ibid.*, 89.

33 *Ibid.*, 112.

34 Robbins, *The Report Of The Committee On Higher Education*, 15.

35 Higher Education Statistics Agency, ‘Who’s Studying in HE?’, Webpage, May 2018.

36 Universities UK, ‘Around a Half of Students Now See Themselves as Customers of Their University’, Webpage, 21 June 2017.

37 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Understanding Employers’ Graduate Recruitment and Selection Practices: Main Report*, vol. BIS Research Paper No. 231 (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2015), 15.

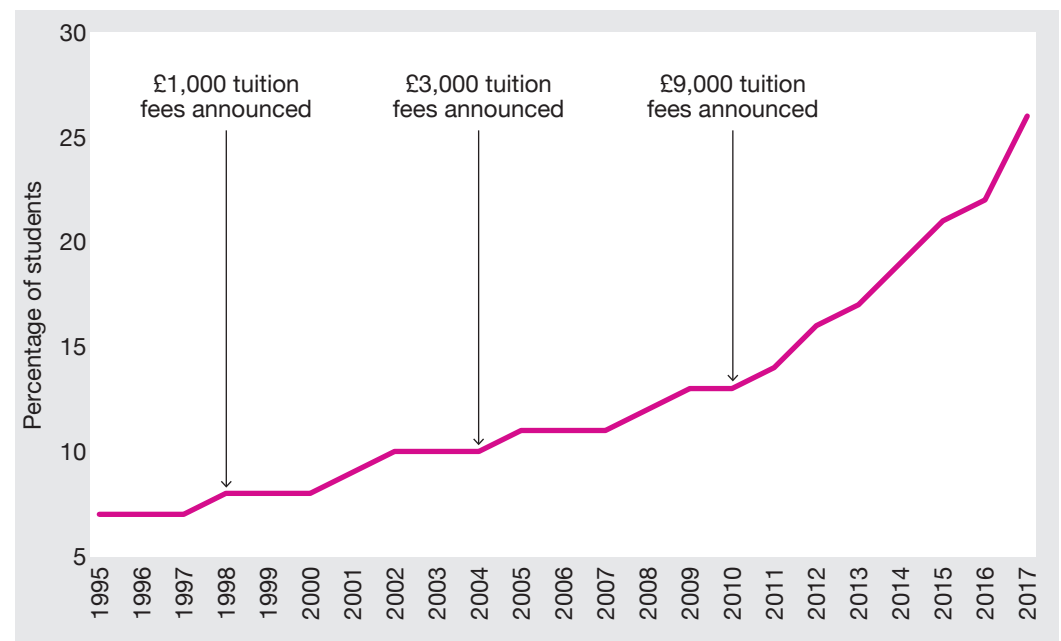
38 Johnson, ‘Embracing Accountability and Promoting Value for Money in Higher Education’.

39 Harry Yorke, ‘Cambridge Don Claims Rapid Grade Inflation Is down to Tuition Fees and Students Working Harder’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 January 2018.

40 Stephen Wilkins and Jeroen Huisman, ‘UK Business School Rankings over the Last 30 Years (1980-2010): Trends and Explanations’, *Higher Education* 63, no. 3 (n.d.): 367–82.

41 BBC News, ‘Tuition Fees Timeline’, Webpage, 16 March 2009.

42 Sean Coughlan, ‘Students Face Tuition Fees Rising to £9,000’, *BBC News Online*, 3 November 2010.

Figure 7: The timeline of tuition fees and the proportion of students awarded a First

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Publications (Open Data: Students in Higher Education)*, 2018.

That said, even if increasing student numbers, a shift towards consumerism, league tables and tuition fees all play a role in grade inflation, the inflation itself must be driven by factors that directly translate into universities awarding higher marks. After all, a truly effective and rigorous degree classification system should be entirely unaffected by these external pressures. This chapter will therefore assess the role of the most commonly cited mechanisms within the control of universities that could have generated inflation in degree outcomes.

2.1 Students and their courses

Higher entry requirements have been used by some universities to justify grade inflation. For example, Professor Neil Ward, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of East Anglia, said last year that the average entry qualification level of graduates had been about 20 per cent higher in 2015-16 than in 2010-11.⁴³ As shown in Figure 5, the University of East Anglia tripled the proportion of Firsts it awarded from 2010 to 2017, which is far in excess of the stated improvement in their students' entry grades. Other universities that have seen their proportion of Firsts double or triple since 2010 would similarly struggle to explain this through changes in entry qualifications.

A study by Lancaster University claimed that the grade inflation from 2005 to 2012 reflected the fact that "quality of the student intake to universities has typically been rising over this period".⁴⁴ While the improvement in A-level grades may have more closely mirrored the rising proportion of Firsts from 2005 to 2012, it certainly does not hold true now. The proportion of A-level students achieving an A or A* has been static from 2010 to 2017 – in fact, it fell by 1 per cent – while the proportion of university students achieving a First has doubled in that time (Figure 8). The study also noted that any grade inflation during this 7-year period "seems to be evident mainly at the boundary between upper second class and first class degrees",⁴⁵ but over the last decade there has been a

43 Simon Baker, 'Sharp Increase in First-Class Degrees Triggers Standards Debate', *Times Higher Education*, 20 July 2017.

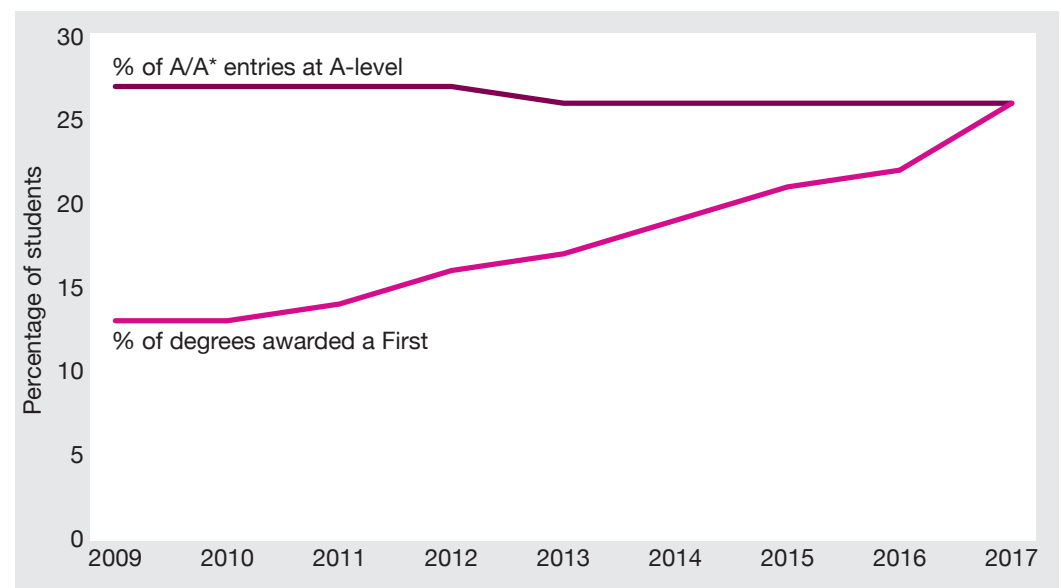
44 Geraint Johnes and Kwok Tong Soo, 'Grades across Universities over Time', *Manchester School* 85, no. 1 (October 2013): 106–31.

45 Ibid.

significant drop of almost 10 per cent in the proportion of 2:2s as well as increasing proportions of grades at the top end. This suggests that, again, the study's conclusions cannot explain the recorded long-term trends.

Furthermore, research by the new 'Office for Students' (see Chapter 3) found that of those students with three C grades at A-level, 23 per cent were awarded a First in 2017 compared to 16 per cent just three years earlier, while for those with two Cs and a D, the proportion of Firsts rose from 14 to 21 per cent in the last three years.⁴⁶ These sharp improvements raise serious doubts about whether students are getting better degree results because they now have better entry grades.

Figure 8: Proportion of students awarded a First compared to the percentage of A/A* results at A-level



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Publications (Open Data: Students in Higher Education)*, 2010-2018; Brian Stubbs, *Student Performance Analysis: National Percentage Figures for A Level Grades*, 2018.

In terms of the possible role of changes in student characteristics, a study by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) suggested that gender and the type of school that a student attended before university could explain a share of the grade inflation from 2011 to 2014⁴⁷ although such claims have been contested elsewhere.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Professor Graham Virgo, Cambridge's Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education, explained grade inflation by simply stating that "the evidence is that students are working harder"⁴⁹ without providing any evidence to support his assertion.

Professor Jane Powell, Vice-Provost at the University of Surrey, said last year that awarding 44 per cent of their degrees as Firsts (a 28 per cent increase since 2010) was the result of their "concentrated focus on enhancing all aspects of our educational provision".⁵⁰ Yet again, though, such claims are largely, if not entirely, unsupported. The National Student Survey found that students' own ratings of 'teaching quality' increased by just six percentage points between 2007 and 2016,⁵¹ suggesting that students have not detected any substantial improvements. The proportion of assessment marks derived from coursework within degrees has also increased since the 1990s, and coursework

46 Nicola Woolcock, 'Increasing Numbers of Weak A-Level Pupils Graduating with Firsts', *The Times*, 5 April 2018.

47 Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Differences in Degree Outcomes: The Effect of Subject and Student Characteristics* (HEFCE, 2015), 4-5.

48 Ray Bachan, 'Grade Inflation in UK Higher Education', *Studies in Higher Education* 42, no. 8 (17 March 2015): 17.

49 Yorke, 'Cambridge Don Claims Rapid Grade Inflation Is down to Tuition Fees and Students Working Harder'.

50 Sean Coughlan, 'University First-Class Degrees Soaring', *BBC News Online*, 20 July 2017.

51 Office for Students, 'National Student Survey - Get the NSS Data', Webpage, May 2018.

usually produces higher marks than examinations.⁵² In 2012 a survey of 85 universities found that in many Bachelor of Arts degrees it was common to see as much as 60 or 80 per cent of the marks being derived from coursework.⁵³ Even so, any effect of a greater emphasis on coursework may be felt through other mechanisms (see Section 2.2 below).

2.2 Degree algorithms

Universities rely on ‘degree algorithms’ to translate the marks achieved in the assessed work of each student into a final degree classification. These algorithms bypass the need for universities to make individual decisions about the classifications awarded to every single student, which is understandable in an age where thousands of students can graduate from a university in a single year. The algorithms are made up of various components and their calculations allow for practices such as ‘compensation’ (when poor performance in one or more modules is offset by scores achieved in other modules), ‘discounting’ (not counting some module marks towards a final degree classification) and altering the balance between, for example, written examinations and coursework grades.

In 2015 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) identified numerous studies and reports that had been critical of the variation in algorithms and regulations used by universities as well as how the weak performance of some students was being handled.⁵⁴ Their report referenced a 2006 study which concluded that “the degree classification system does not assure that students achieving the same standards will obtain the same result within or across universities”.⁵⁵ The report also recognised that league tables “will have an influence on institutional decision-making”.⁵⁶ For example, approximately half of university quality officers reported that their institution had changed their degree algorithms in the last five years “to ensure that they do not disadvantage students in comparison with those in similar institutions”.⁵⁷ The HEA concluded that:

*If providers are continuously benchmarking their awards against others in the sector ... and others are changing their algorithms, there is bound to be an upward movement in award outcomes irrespective of changes in student performance.*⁵⁸

Another report on degree algorithms by UUK in 2017 sought to understand how universities used them and “assess whether there are trends that might undermine wider confidence in degree standards”.⁵⁹ The report found “competitor or sector alignment” was one of the most common reasons given by universities changing the algorithms.⁶⁰ Although UUK believed that such alterations were not as prevalent as the HEA suggested, it raised concerns on issues such as the treatment of ‘borderline’ cases where a student’s overall mark is close to the boundary of a better degree classification, which “should not be used to effectively lower the threshold for classifications.”⁶¹ However, the report did not investigate the extent to which institutions were indeed ‘upgrading’ students near a grade boundary, even though this would “undermine both conventional practice and confidence in sector standards.”⁶² The report also commented that “where institutions discount lowest grades, particularly in the initial classification and for borderline cases, upper marks should also be discounted”⁶³ because both high and low outlier grades should be removed to remain fair and impartial. Yet again, though, the report did not investigate how often discounting lower but not upper marks might be occurring.

52 Graham Gibbs, *Dimensions of Quality* (York: Higher Education Academy, 2010), 38.

53 Julie Henry, ‘No-Exam University Courses Fuel Rise in First Class Degrees’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 November 2012.

54 Higher Education Academy, *A Review of External Examining Arrangements across the UK* (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2015), 94.

55 *Ibid.*, 35.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*, 55.

58 *Ibid.*

59 Universities UK, *Understanding Degree Algorithms* (London: Universities UK, 2017), 1.

60 *Ibid.*, 18.

61 *Ibid.*, 38.

62 *Ibid.*, 40.

63 *Ibid.*, 50.

To compound these omissions, a study by David Allen at the University of the West of England published in January 2018 showed that the use of different algorithms is leading to students who achieve the same set of marks in separate universities being awarded widely divergent final degree scores.⁶⁴ So dramatic are these variations, an institution could have up to double the proportion of Firsts compared to another university with an identical set of student grades depending on which of six degree algorithms tested in this study was being used.⁶⁵

The evidence suggests that degree algorithms could be playing an important role in driving grade inflation. Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), recently commented that “universities are essentially massaging the figures, they are changing the algorithms and putting borderline candidates north of the border”, adding that “competition, in part driven by league tables, has added extra incentives to award higher marks”.⁶⁶ With each university designing and implementing its own algorithms without any reference to an external authority, this outcome was entirely predictable.

2.3 Lower standards

In a 2015 paper on grade inflation in UK universities, Ray Bachan from the University of Brighton pointed out that “there may be a conscious effort by UK universities to lower the ‘hedonistic’ price by lowering standards to attract fee paying students.”⁶⁷ Professor Geoffrey Alderman observed back in 2010 that there were already “intolerable pressures on academic staff to pass students who should rightfully fail and to award higher classes of degrees to the undeserving.”⁶⁸ The Select Committee in 2009 also received direct evidence of such pressures. One academic told the Committee that “a typical degree awarded in the Arts & Humanities is worth less than its equivalent of even five years ago, and certainly less than ten or twenty years ago”⁶⁹ while another complained that they had:

...received essays that were almost impossible to follow, largely empty of content, a regurgitation of lecture notes or basic textbooks and factually incorrect. I routinely awarded these essays low grades but have been brought under pressure, internally and externally, to provide higher grades.⁷⁰

This notion of pressure from university leaders on academics to award higher grades, even if it reduces standards, has repeatedly emerged in media reports. *The Guardian* published the following remarks from two academics in 2017 as part of their coverage of grade inflation:

There is intense pressure on academics from university management to gain high scores in the National Student Survey, because this feeds into university league tables. ... The pressures on academics mean that they (probably unconsciously in many cases) err on the side of generosity when awarding grades in order to gain positive student survey results and to avoid student complaints.

In my university the metric is that you have to get more firsts than 2:1s. This means almost all universities are involved in this game-playing. It is a race to the bottom. ... all universities seem to be experiencing the same managerial pressure to boost student grades. Largely this is done by requiring less student effort over the course of a degree.⁷¹

64 Ellie Bothwell, ‘Degree Algorithms Create “Artificial Differences” in Final Grades’, *Times Higher Education*, 25 January 2018.

65 Ibid.

66 Harry Yorke, ‘Three Quarters of Graduates Get 2:1 or Firsts as Regulator Issues Warning to Universities to Halt Grade Inflation’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 January 2018.

67 Bachan, ‘Grade Inflation in UK Higher Education’, 23.

68 Geoffrey Alderman, ‘Why University Standards Have Fallen’, *The Guardian*, 10 March 2010.

69 House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, *Students and Universities: Eleventh Report of Session 2008–09*, 109.

70 Ibid.

71 Sarah Marsh, ‘Why Are Students Getting More Firsts at University?’, *The Guardian*, 21 July 2017.

Similar stories of falling standards are not hard to find. A survey of over 2,000 academics in 2015 found that almost half of them had recently experienced pressure to bump up student grades or stop students failing.⁷² In 2012, a former academic claimed that “managers pressured lecturers to make sure nobody failed and sought to inflate grades.”⁷³ In 2009, a law lecturer was removed from his university’s academic board when he revealed in a submission to the aforementioned Select Committee in 2009 that 20 marks had been added to the scores of around 90 students studying international business law because their results were so bad.⁷⁴ At another university, internal documents revealed that they had ‘upgraded’ a number of pharmacy students – effectively lowering the pass mark on one course to 26 per cent – after half of them failed their exams.⁷⁵ In 2010, a professor became embroiled in a conflict with his university after he failed 18 out of 60 examination papers, only for the university to overrule him to the point where several students were moved from a clear ‘fail’ to a ‘pass’. The professor remarked that, before his case came to light, “the message sent out to universities was that you could bully staff into upping grades – ‘if you don’t give the marks we want, we’ll get someone else to do it for us’ – which is what happened to me.”⁷⁶

These are by no means the only examples of such behaviour by senior leaders at universities. As with other possible contributors to grade inflation, it is difficult to say for certain what proportion of the inflation over the past two decades was caused by lowering standards. Even so, the evidence above lends further weight to the notion that universities are not as willing as one might hope to protect quality and standards, particularly when league tables and tuition fees are so high on their agenda.

72 Rebecca Ratcliffe and Claire Shaw, ‘Academics under Pressure to Bump up Student Grades’, *The Guardian*, 18 May 2015.

73 Richard Garner, ‘University Lecturers “Pressured to Make Sure Nobody Failed Exams”’, *The Independent*, 11 June 2012.

74 Julie Henry, ‘The University Professor Who Stood up against Dumbing down of Degrees’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 February 2010.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

3

Who could stop grade inflation?

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The existence of long-term and widespread grade inflation inevitably raises the question of what measures are used within HE to safeguard standards. The main quality assurance mechanisms will be discussed in this chapter to ascertain their effectiveness in combatting grade inflation.

3.1 The Quality Assurance Agency

Universities have operated what is best described as a system of ‘self-regulation’ for many years. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was established in 1997 and has been funded by HE institutions and through contracts with the major funding councils across the UK. The QAA has conducted regular visits to universities to assess their procedures for monitoring and assuring standards and to make recommendations for improvement. The cornerstone of the QAA’s work has been the *Quality Code*, which set out 19 ‘expectations’ that HE providers are required to meet and this Code forms the basis of their visits. The *Quality Code* should be used to describe and monitor standards as well as the quality of learning in an institution, with HE providers using it to design degree courses and their wider policies for maintaining standards.⁷⁷ In addition, a range of ‘Subject Benchmark Statements’ form part of the *Quality Code* and aim to define what can be expected of graduates in terms of the abilities and skills acquired in each subject.

When speaking to Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee in 2009, the QAA were adamant that they are not an inspectorate or a regulator nor do they have statutory powers to direct HE institutions, adding that “we do not judge the standards themselves.”⁷⁸ Professor Geoffrey Alderman said that “it is possible to come out of the QAA with a glowing report but in fact have poor standards.”⁷⁹ Others noted that “each department or faculty assesses the ‘quality’ of its own course, but this assessment is usually merely an examination of the course documentation”.⁸⁰ Dr Fenton, an academic, went a step further by saying that the QAA was “another bureaucratic, administrative burden that you learn to play the game of”.⁸¹ The Committee felt it was “unacceptable for the sector to be ... unable to answer a straightforward question about the relative standards of the degrees of the students, which the taxpayer has paid for”.⁸² As a result, they recommended that the QAA should be re-cast as a ‘Quality and Standards Agency’ with the responsibility for maintaining consistent, national standards in HE and for monitoring and reporting on them over time. The HE sector ignored the Committee’s recommendation at the time and it has not been enacted since.

The fact that the QAA has now been appointed by the new ‘Office for Students’ (see Section 3.4) as the ‘Designated Quality Body’ for the sector⁸³ does not bode well in light of its previous shortcomings. The *Quality Code* was itself revised in March 2018 and its new incarnation is just a few pages in length.⁸⁴ This drastically-reduced Code makes no explicit mention of the need to prevent grade inflation or protect standards, save for outlining its hope that “the value of qualifications ... over time is in line with sector-recognised standards” and that degree qualifications are “reasonably comparable” between HE providers.⁸⁵ Such ambiguous statements show why the QAA and the *Quality Code* do not offer sufficient protection against grade inflation.

77 Quality Assurance Agency, ‘Introducing the Quality Code’, Webpage, 13 March 2018.

78 House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, *Students and Universities: Eleventh Report of Session 2008–09*, 92.

79 *Ibid.*, 93.

80 *Ibid.*

81 *Ibid.*, 93.

82 *Ibid.*, 97.

83 Department for Education, ‘Higher Education Quality and Data Bodies: Notice of Designation’, Webpage, 8 February 2018.

84 UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, ‘Consultation on the UK Quality Code for HE’, Webpage, March 2018.

85 *Ibid.*

3.2 External examiners

Universities have used a system of ‘external examiners’ in some form since 1832.⁸⁶ The role of an external examiner is essentially that of a moderator, as they do not mark individual students’ work but moderate the marking carried out by internal examiners at other institutions. This enables the external examiner, at least in theory, to form a view as to whether students’ performance is being rigorously judged against the university’s standards and against standards in the wider HE sector.⁸⁷

Questions over the effectiveness of these arrangements are not new. In 1985, the *Lindop Report* was “concerned that there are wide variations in practice between institutions and between examiners which lessen the overall effectiveness of the system” while a subsequent report by the Higher Education Quality Council (the predecessor to the QAA) in 1996 concluded that “the external examiner system can no longer be plausibly described as effective in calibrating standards across higher education”.⁸⁸

The 2009 Select Committee heard from UUK that the involvement of external examiners was “recognised internationally as a key mechanism for ensuring comparability across the UK higher education system”, with UUK even calling it “a jewel in the crown of UK quality maintenance”.⁸⁹ However, the Committee received evidence that indicated that “this ‘jewel in the crown’ had become tarnished”, with one academic saying that the system of external examiners “is too often abused”⁹⁰ while another pointed out that “many universities have succeeded in severely restricting the scope for action by the external examiner”.⁹¹ The Committee decided that the ‘repair’ of the external examiner system should begin by enacting the recommendation made in the *Dearing Report* twelve years earlier to create a UK-wide pool of academic staff from which institutions must select external examiners along with a new national ‘remit’ to introduce more consistency and objectivity.⁹² The HE sector did not act on the recommendation in the *Dearing Report* in 1997 and they ignored it again following the Committee’s report in 2009.

What’s more, research has consistently highlighted the flaws in the external examiner system. A report by the University of Cumbria and Oxford Brookes University in 2014 made the following observation:

*...there have been recurring concerns that it is no longer able to warrant comparable standards across universities. Criticisms have included a lack of consistency in examiners’ appointment and role and unwelcome variability in examining practices in different programmes, subject disciplines and universities resulting from weak or inconsistent institutional processes. Also noted have been anxieties about the potential for ‘cosy’ relationships between examiners and departments, and concerns about clarity and authority in examiners’ role in assuring standards.*⁹³

In addition, a report by the HEA in 2015 found that “broader empirical research provides clear evidence of the inconsistency and unreliability of higher education assessors.”⁹⁴ Less than 60 per cent of external examiners thought that they could assure standards in the face of pressures caused by grade inflation and league tables⁹⁵ and over half felt that increased tuition fees, greater competition among universities and the growth in student numbers were now affecting their role.⁹⁶ The report concluded that there was “little evidence to

86 Mike Cuthbert, ‘The External Examiner: How Did We Get Here?’, Webpage, 6 June 2003.

87 Quality Assurance Agency and Higher Education Academy, *External Examiners’ Understanding and Use of Academic Standards* (Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2013), 1.

88 Cuthbert, ‘The External Examiner: How Did We Get Here?’

89 House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, *Students and Universities: Eleventh Report of Session 2008–09*, 119.

90 *Ibid.*, 120.

91 *Ibid.*

92 *Ibid.*, 121.

93 Quality Assurance Agency and Higher Education Academy, *External Examiners’ Understanding and Use of Academic Standards*, 3.

94 Higher Education Academy, *A Review of External Examining Arrangements across the UK*, 5.

95 *Ibid.*, 68.

96 *Ibid.*, 70.

support the view that external examiners are an effective means to safeguard academic standards”.⁹⁷ Despite this unambiguous message, the HEA report found that there was “overwhelming support in the sector for external examining”.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, external examiners, while serving a useful purpose, are evidently not able to prevent grade inflation.

3.3 The Teaching Excellence Framework

In November 2015, the Government announced that they were developing a new ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’ (TEF) to “identify and incentivise the highest quality teaching to drive up standards in higher education, deliver better quality for students and employers and better value for taxpayers.”⁹⁹ This was in response to concerns that the information available to students regarding teaching quality was unclear, difficult to find and did not allow them to make reliable comparison between HE institutions.¹⁰⁰

The ‘awards’ given to each HE provider, in the form of a Gold, Silver or Bronze rating, are judged by an independent panel of students, academics and other experts that assess each provider’s undergraduate courses against ten criteria, including data on how many students complete their studies, student satisfaction ratings and employment outcomes. The panel also assess written evidence submitted by the provider.¹⁰¹ The overall TEF rating for each institution measures their performance against benchmarks based on their student intake rather than making absolute judgements. The first results of the TEF were published in June 2017, with 60 institutions awarded ‘Gold’, 115 awarded ‘Silver’ and 53 awarded ‘Bronze’.¹⁰²

In October 2017, the Government announced a new ‘supplementary metric’ on grade inflation “with each provider supplying information for the percentage of students awarded a first, upper second and third/pass from those who have obtained a classified degree award over a number of years.”¹⁰³ This information will be used by the panel in future to make a judgement about ‘rigour and stretch’ within each HE institution. Providers have inevitably called for this metric to be removed. The Russell Group of research-intensive universities publicly stated that it is not needed because “peer-reviewers should have sufficient subject-specific expertise to assess quality of teaching for each subject”¹⁰⁴ – an assertion that is called into question by the research presented earlier in this chapter.

The problem with the approach in the TEF is two-fold. First, as covered in the previous chapter, the range of ‘justifications’ already being offered by HE providers (e.g. improvements in teaching quality) to explain grade inflation are hard to quantify and may therefore be hard to disprove. Second, the metric is not intended to assess comparability across the HE system as the TEF is conducted at an institutional level. Former universities minister Jo Johnson appeared to acknowledge this last year when he said that the grade inflation metric will merely “provide a counterweight to traditional ranking systems”¹⁰⁵ rather than address its underlying causes.

The Russell Group claim it is “unreasonable that the burden of proof to demonstrate that ‘grade inflation’ has not taken place will reside with the provider, with assessors being advised to accept arguments only where there is clear and robust evidence to support them.”¹⁰⁶ For sector representatives to decry the need to provide evidence in support of their explanations for grade inflation illustrates how little scrutiny they wish to see applied

97 Ibid., 11.

98 Ibid., 12.

99 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 2015), 18.

100 Ibid., 20.

101 Office for Students, ‘What Is the TEF?’, Webpage, 8 May 2018.

102 Office for Students, ‘TEF Outcomes: Find a Provider’, Webpage, 8 May 2018.

103 Department for Education, *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework: Lessons Learned from Year Two, 2017*, 56.

104 Russell Group, *Response to Subject-Level TEF Technical Consultation* (Russell Group, 2018), 1.

105 Johnson, ‘Embracing Accountability and Promoting Value for Money in Higher Education’.

106 Russell Group, *Response to Subject-Level TEF Technical Consultation*, 9.

to this matter. Nevertheless, the TEF metric has not been designed in a way that would prevent grade inflation or deal with the lack of comparability in standards between different providers.

3.4 The Office for Students

In April 2018, the ‘Office for Students’ (OfS) became the new regulator for HE in England, replacing HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access.¹⁰⁷ The OfS has four primary regulatory objectives, which include ensuring that degree qualifications “hold their value over time” and that students “receive value for money”.¹⁰⁸ The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) outlines the functions that the OfS must perform as the independent regulator of HE. These include, among other responsibilities:

- > The need to protect the institutional autonomy of English HE providers.
- > The need to promote quality, and greater choice and opportunities for students.
- > The need to encourage competition between English HE providers (where that competition is in the interests of students and employers).
- > The need to promote value for money.¹⁰⁹

The OfS notes that it will take all of these duties into account when making decisions, “weighing one against the others as it deems appropriate”.¹¹⁰ Even so, it is unclear how quality and standards can be maintained, let alone improved, if the autonomy of HE providers is given such prominence. The emphasis on promoting competition, particularly in an environment where grade inflation appears to be getting worse rather than better, is also a cause for concern. What’s more, the OfS regulatory framework declares that its approach to regulation “puts informed student choice and institutional autonomy at its heart”¹¹¹ instead of the need to maintain the integrity and quality of HE. The framework further notes that it sees the “dynamic of providers responding to informed student choice as the best mechanism for driving quality and improvement”,¹¹² yet this overlooks the perverse incentives created by league tables and tuition fees as well as not recognising that students receive no information about the comparability of degree standards between universities – leaving them unable to make truly ‘informed’ choices.

A key function of the OfS is to decide which organisations can offer HE courses through their ‘conditions of registration’, which all providers must comply with.¹¹³ For example, the conditions state that every HE provider must deliver “well-designed courses that provide a high quality academic experience for all students and enable a student’s achievement to be reliably assessed” as well as “deliver successful outcomes for all of its students, which are recognised and valued by employers and/or enable further study.”¹¹⁴ In order to make judgements on each provider, the OfS will be reliant on the verdict of the QAA, the new (and very short) *Quality Code*, student surveys and information such as graduate employment data. Given past experience with such datasets, it is not clear how this will result in the OfS making valid and reliable judgements about the quality and standard of any given degree course.

The most pertinent condition of registration for grade inflation states that all HE providers “must ensure that qualifications awarded to students hold their value at the point of qualification and over time, in line with sector recognised standards.”¹¹⁵ ‘Sector-recognised

¹⁰⁷ Office for Students, *Securing Student Success: Regulatory Framework for Higher Education in England* (Bristol: Office for Students, 2018), 14.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 82.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 87.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

standards' refers to what are known as 'threshold academic standards' (as in, the minimum expectations) for awarding each HE qualification such as a degree.¹¹⁶ This does not relate to the comparability of standards between institutions or the standards that students must meet to receive each particular degree classification. Furthermore, the HERA states that 'sector-recognised standards' must be "determined by persons representing a broad range of registered higher education providers" and must "[command] the confidence of registered higher education providers."¹¹⁷ In other words, the only people who are allowed to set standards in HE are the HE providers themselves. When judging whether a qualification holds its value 'over time', the OfS will rely yet again on the judgements of the QAA as well as any student and staff complaints. Degree outcomes can also be considered, but the conditions of registration do not explain how this information will be used or whether grade inflation will be investigated as part of these deliberations.

The conditions of registration could be a powerful mechanism in tackling grade inflation, but the HERA appears more concerned with protecting universities than protecting standards. In Section 2 of the Act, it states that "the OfS must have regard to guidance given to it by the Secretary of State [for Education]" but states immediately afterwards that "in giving such guidance, the Secretary of State must have regard to the need to protect [...] institutional autonomy."¹¹⁸ The Act goes on to say that any guidance from the Secretary of State "must not relate to particular parts of courses of study, the content of such courses [or] the manner in which they are taught, supervised or assessed".¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the Secretary of State "must not guide the OfS to perform a function in a way which prohibits or requires the provision of a particular course of study."¹²⁰ For the legislation underpinning the new regulator of HE in England to explicitly prevent any Secretary of State from intervening when a course, or set of courses, is found to be delivering an unacceptably poor standard of education serves to demonstrate just how far the concept of 'autonomy' shields universities from external scrutiny.

3.5 Professional bodies

'Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies' (PSRBs) is the umbrella term given to the diverse group of organisations that engage with HE providers, including a large number of professional bodies, regulators and those with statutory authority over a profession or group of professionals.¹²¹ There are thought to be over 130 PSRBs working in the HE sector.¹²² The QAA works closely with PSRBs through their jointly-held Forum and Steering Group, members of which include the General Medical Council, the British Psychological Society, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Bar Standards Board.¹²³

PSRBs often focus on describing curriculum content as well as defining professional knowledge and competence.¹²⁴ Many PSRBs also provide 'accreditation' i.e. approving or recognising specific courses,¹²⁵ which can allow graduates to practise as professionals in their field or provide entry to membership of a professional association or learned society. Some PSRBs also have the authority to confer a 'licence to practise' in the area it regulates (e.g. solicitors).¹²⁶ Moreover, accreditation allows HE providers to benchmark their programmes against their peers as well as the standards agreed by the professions. The accreditation process often involves formal on-site visits as well as the submission of

116 Ibid., 89.

117 HM Government, *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*, Section 13.

118 HM Government, *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*, Section 2.

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.

121 Higher Education Better Regulation Group, *Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies: An Exploration of Their Engagement with Higher Education* (London: Higher Education Better Regulation Group, 2011), 8.

122 Ibid., 4.

123 Higher Education Better Regulation Group, *Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies: An Exploration of Their Engagement with Higher Education*.

124 Ibid., 13.

125 Ibid., 12.

126 Ibid.

documentation to the PSRB in order for them to make an informed judgement about the provider's suitability.¹²⁷

In 2011 the Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee heard from many witnesses about the value of accreditation by professional bodies as a signal of degree quality for students and parents alike.¹²⁸ More recently, the HEA report on external examiners in 2015 found that "consistency and comparability of academic standards are considered to be stronger ... in subjects regulated by a professional body."¹²⁹ Another report in 2015, prepared for the HE funding bodies across the UK, found that "most stakeholders spoke positively of the role currently played by PSRBs in providing input for the assurance of academic standards, with some arguing that academic institutions should work more closely with PSRBs."¹³⁰

It is hard to think of a PSRB that must demonstrate a greater commitment to the quality of degree programmes than the General Medical Council (GMC). They set the expected outcomes and standards for all medical education and training in the UK and regulate all stages of doctors' professional development.¹³¹ Every medical school must meet the standards set by the GMC or risk losing their ability to award medical degrees. The GMC carefully evaluate each medical school through visits, monitoring and even approving those individuals who train medical students.¹³²

Guidance from the GMC states that "medical schools develop and implement curricula and assessments to make sure that medical graduates can demonstrate [the required] outcomes".¹³³ In addition, "medical schools are responsible for the quality of assessments" and they must "make sure only medical students who demonstrate all the learning outcomes are permitted to graduate."¹³⁴ Even with such strict rules and guidance, though, serious concerns have been raised about the consistency of standards across HE institutions. The outcome of medical degrees is generally a 'Pass/Fail' decision but, despite the GMC specifying in considerable detail what students must demonstrate to reach the required standard at the end of their training, it became clear that the Pass/Fail threshold was not being applied consistently. For example, one recent study found that "there were statistically significant differences in the passing standards set by [medical] schools" in both 2014 and 2015.¹³⁵

In response to these findings, the GMC is introducing a new two-part *Medical Licensing Assessment* (MLA).¹³⁶ The first part is an applied knowledge test that medical graduates will take in their final year. This will be computer-based and set, administered and marked by GMC. The second part is an assessment of clinical skills, which medical students will do as part of their degree assessment. Medical schools will run the assessment and the GMC will check that it meets their standards. The two-part MLA will begin operating in 2022 after an extensive period of piloting and testing. The GMC are also planning to work with medical schools to explore whether the applied knowledge test could be used to meet some of their wider degree requirements.

The benefits of a single, national assessment for entering the medical profession are obvious. The threshold to pass this assessment will be the same for all students, creating a truly comparable standard across the country, and the final assessment will be the same

127 Ibid.

128 House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee, *Government Reform of Higher Education: Twelfth Report of Session 2010–12*, vol. Volume I, HC 885 (London: The Stationery Office, 2011), 61.

129 Higher Education Academy, 'Degree Standards: Professional Development and Calibration for the External Examining System in the UK', Webpage, 8 May 2018, 8.

130 Quality Assessment Review Steering Group, *The Future of Quality Assessment in Higher Education: Analysis of Responses to Phase 1 of the Quality Assessment Review* (London: Quality Assessment Review Steering Group, 2015), 48.

131 General Medical Council, 'Standards, Guidance and Curricula', Webpage, May 2018.

132 General Medical Council, 'Medical Schools', Webpage, May 2018.

133 General Medical Council, *Promoting Excellence: Standards for Medical Education and Training* (London: General Medical Council, 2015), 31.

134 Ibid.

135 Celia A. Taylor et al., 'Variation in Passing Standards for Graduation-level Knowledge Items at UK Medical Schools', *Medical Education* 51, no. 6 (June 2017): 612–20.

136 General Medical Council, 'Medical Licensing Assessment', Webpage, May 2018.

regardless of which medical school they attended or whether they come from the UK or abroad. It will also help the GMC maintain the high standard of UK medical education as more students and potential new schools are added into the mix.¹³⁷ Given these considerable advantages, it was unsurprising that, in the consultation exercise after the MLA was first announced, 64% of responses supported its aim while only 14% did not.¹³⁸

The GMC is not the only example of PSRBs imposing their requirements on HE providers. The Bar Standards Board specifies that every law degree or law conversion course must include the seven foundations of legal knowledge (e.g. Criminal Law) as well as develop the skills associated with graduate legal work (e.g. legal research).¹³⁹ The UUK research on degree algorithms (see Section 2.3) found that law students “were a common exclusion from any institutions that permitted failed, compulsory credits to be retaken in the next academic year (likely due to PSRB requirements).”¹⁴⁰ Together, these two influences of the PSRB may help explain why Law produces the lowest percentage of Firsts out of all the subject groups (see Section 1.2).

Meanwhile, the General Pharmaceutical Council has a ‘registration assessment’ that operates in a similar way to the proposed MLA. It assesses whether trainee pharmacists can apply their knowledge appropriately and in a timely way to make professional judgements and also tests whether trainees are able to perform the calculations necessary to practice as a pharmacist. Candidates have three attempts to pass the entire assessment in one sitting, and must answer two question papers. The assessment is carried out simultaneously in locations across Great Britain twice a year. The justification for their national assessment is that it can “provide assurance to patients and the public that the pharmacy professionals on our register can practice safely and effectively”.¹⁴¹ This demonstrates that the desire for fairness, consistency and comparability is a key consideration for many professions.

137 General Medical Council, ‘Developing the MLA’, Webpage, May 2018.

138 General Medical Council, ‘Medical Licensing Assessment’.

139 Bar Standards Board, ‘Becoming a Barrister’, Webpage, May 2018.

140 Universities UK, *Understanding Degree Algorithms*, 33.

141 General Pharmaceutical Council, ‘Registration Assessment’, Webpage, 2016.

4

A new model to prevent grade inflation

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As discussed in the last chapter, longstanding features of the HE system such as the QAA and external examiners are not able to prevent grade inflation, while the TEF and OfS do not have the necessary levers or foundations to address this issue. A new approach is therefore needed if grade inflation is to be brought to an end.

Through the actions of the then Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove and the examination regulator Ofqual following the 2010 General Election, grade inflation has now essentially been contained for both GCSE and A-level results with little variation from year to year.¹⁴² This has been achieved largely through the system of ‘comparable outcomes’¹⁴³ that seeks to maintain standards over time. Above all, the experience of the school sector demonstrated that the only way to tackle grade inflation in an effective and sustainable manner is to stop the organisations who stand to benefit financially from inflated outcomes (in schools, examination boards; in HE, universities) from being the sole arbiters of which grades or outcomes are awarded to students.

A simple solution would be to mirror the approach used for GCSEs and A-levels where examinations are set and marked by an external examination board, with all students essentially taking the same course and sitting the same examinations irrespective of where they are studying. The *Dearing Report* resisted this idea as it felt that complete uniformity through a full ‘national curriculum’:

*...would deny higher education the vitality, excitement and challenge that comes from institutions consciously pursuing distinctive purposes, with academics having scope to pursue their own scholarship and enthusiasms in their teaching.*¹⁴⁴

Similarly, the Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee report on HE in 2011 accepted that relying wholly on a national curriculum “risks restricting the ability of institutions to differentiate themselves and specialise.”¹⁴⁵

Another solution, recently put forward by a former senior civil servant, is for the HE sector to agree that each provider will not award more than a certain proportion of Firsts and 2:1s each year.¹⁴⁶ However, this would be insufficient because it fails to create comparability in standards, as each provider is still determining their own students’ degree classifications without any reference to the performance of students at other institutions. It is also highly doubtful that the sector would voluntarily subscribe to this proposal.

The *Dearing Report* was clear that HE must “reconcile that desirable diversity with achievement of reasonable consistency in standards of awards.”¹⁴⁷ The report from the Innovation, Universities and Skills Select Committee in 2009 shared this sentiment, noting that degrees must be categorised “against a consistent set of standards across all higher education institutions [...but] we have concerns that the higher education sector neither sees the need for this step nor is willing to implement it”.¹⁴⁸ The challenge is therefore to produce a new system for awarding degrees that allows HE providers to operate as autonomous and diverse institutions while ensuring that the standards required to attain each degree classification are comparable across institutions and over time.

142 Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, ‘Ofqual Publishes Reports Relating to 2017 GCSEs, AS and A Levels’, Webpage, 14 December 2017.

143 Ofqual, ‘GCSE Marking and Grading’, Webpage, 5 August 2015.

144 Dearing, *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education*, 142.

145 House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee, *Government Reform of Higher Education: Twelfth Report of Session 2010–12*, Volume 1:66.

146 Iain Mansfield, ‘Grade Inflation: A Clear and Present Danger’, *WonkHE*, 17 May 2018.

147 Dearing, *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education*, 142.

148 House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, *Students and Universities: Eleventh Report of Session 2008–09*, 114.

4.1 A new approach to assessing degree courses

One of the most significant changes in education policy in recent years has been the movement towards involving ‘end users’ in the design of qualifications. For A-levels, universities advised the Government on the content of the new courses.¹⁴⁹ For apprenticeships, employers were given responsibility for determining the skills, knowledge and behaviours that apprentices needed to acquire as well as designing the new ‘end-point’ assessments. For the upcoming T-level qualifications, groups of employers have again taken responsibility for writing the content of the new courses with a new assessment being designed too.¹⁵⁰ These examples illustrate how the Government has repeatedly bypassed providers and instead given the responsibility for setting standards to the groups and relevant bodies who are the end-users of the qualification i.e. employ those who have completed it.

The *Dearing Report* said that HE had to “adopt a national framework of awards with rigorously maintained standards, with the academic community recognising that the autonomy of institutions can be sustained only within a framework of collective responsibility for standards, supported by the active involvement of professional bodies.”¹⁵¹ PSRBs now play a vital role in HE through providing external scrutiny of standards in a largely autonomous system, so it is logical to create a set of proposals for ending grade inflation that extends this type of relationship more widely across the HE system.

Many degree courses are not overseen by a PSRB at present. The first step in tackling grade inflation is therefore to expand the role of PSRBs. The most appropriate way to achieve this is for the OfS to introduce a new ‘condition of registration’ that requires all HE providers to only offer undergraduate degree courses that are formally recognised by an external body known as a ‘Designated Assessment Body’ (DAB).

In order to appoint DABs for all undergraduate degrees, the OfS should invite expressions of interest from organisations wishing to be considered a DAB for a particular set of degree courses. HESA break down the list of subjects available to undergraduates by ‘subject area’ (creating 19 high-level groups) and ‘Principal subject’ (creating 165 subject groups).¹⁵² Through a phased roll-out over four academic years, expressions of interest would be invited from organisations or groups of organisations who now wish to formally oversee degree courses in their specialist area. It could be arranged so that subject areas with a longer tradition of working with external bodies such as PSRBs could be invited to become DAB first, with other subject areas coming later. For example:

2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
Medicine and Dentistry	Subjects allied to medicine	Agriculture & related subjects	Mass communications & documentation
Veterinary science	Biological sciences	Mathematical sciences	Languages
Engineering & technology	Physical sciences	Architecture, building & planning	Historical & philosophical studies
Law	Computer science	Social studies	Creative arts & design
		Business & administrative studies	Education

149 The A-Level Content Advisory Board, ‘About Us’, Webpage, 31 May 2013.

150 Department for Education, ‘T Level Panels: Membership’, Webpage, 4 January 2018.

151 Dearing, *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education*, 10.

152 Higher Education Statistics Agency, ‘What Do HE Students Study?’, Webpage, May 2018.

Organisations would formally ask to be recognised as the DAB for the ‘principal subjects’ listed within each of these high-level groups. For example, one organisation may request the role of DAB for both ‘Biology’ and ‘Microbiology’ while another may ask for just ‘Psychology’. This process would allow the OfS to assess the relevance, sector expertise, representativeness and track record in quality assurance of the organisations who put themselves forward before making a final decision.

Existing PSRBs that provide a professional registration or accreditation function for HE courses would be well-placed to function as DABs, although it is envisaged that learned societies who have not necessarily taken on this role in the past (e.g. the British Academy) would come forward to represent their areas of expertise, potentially in combination with other organisations that have strong links to the arts and humanities. The process would also be open to organisations putting forward joint expressions of interest or the OfS may recommend that a group of organisations are jointly awarded DAB status for a principal subject.

Recommendation 1

The Office for Students should introduce a new ‘condition of registration’ that requires all Higher Education providers to only offer undergraduate degree courses that are formally recognised by an external body known as a ‘Designated Assessment Body’ (DAB).

The DAB will decide what is required of each degree course that they are appointed to oversee, which would likely draw on the existing ‘Subject Benchmark Statements’ produced by the QAA. In addition, the DAB can set further requirements if they can demonstrate that it would improve the quality of provision, including the specification of maximum student:staff ratios or minimum levels of facilities and resources that HE institutions must possess. Furthermore, the DAB has the power to stop any university from delivering a degree course should they feel that the required standards have not been met. For example, the GMC already has the power to decide which HE providers can offer medical degrees.

Recommendation 2

The new DAB would be given the power to set the requirements for all HE providers when offering each degree course and they can refuse to allow a provider to offer a degree course if their standards are not met. The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) should be amended so that the DABs are allowed to specify ‘sector-recognised standards’.

It will be up to the DAB, in partnership with HE providers, to decide what requirements are suitable and proportionate for their subject(s). The OfS may wish to specify a list of conditions that DABs can impose, drawing on the work of existing PSRBs that set expectations and requirements ranging from relatively light-touch to more rigid guidance when professional registration is involved. Regardless of the final arrangements, it is not appropriate to continue with a situation in which the HERA prevents societies and organisations other than HE providers themselves from setting the required standards.

There is already precedent for PSRBs imposing strict requirements on degree courses (e.g. the Bar Standards Board) as well as creating a single, national assessment at the end of a degree course (e.g. the GMC) to create comparability and consistency. These two foundations should be combined for all newly-appointed DABs to address grade inflation.

Each DAB would create a single, national assessment for all final-year students in the subject(s) that they are responsible for. This would be based on a 'core curriculum' written by the DAB in partnership with HE providers that would cover the fundamental elements of the degree course in question. It is envisaged that this assessment would be no more than 3-4 hours in length. It may comprise of one or two separate elements (e.g. one 'knowledge' and one 'skills' test) and it would be up to the DAB to decide whether the test(s) would be best suited to a paper-based or online format.

The assessment would be sat at the same time by all final-year students around the country. The DAB would be responsible for organising the marking of these assessments in terms of deciding whether they would be marked by the DAB themselves (as proposed by the GMC) or whether universities would mark the examination scripts for students from other institutions. Regarding timescales, the DAB would have a maximum of four academic years after their appointment by the OfS in which to design and implement the new assessment. This would allow time for consultations with HE providers, assessment experts and other relevant parties while also leaving room for testing and piloting.

Because the new assessment is restricted to a 'core curriculum' and no more than 3-4 hours of examination time, the remainder of a student's university degree course would continue to run as now without any involvement of the DAB. Each HE provider would be free to deliver whichever topics, modules and assessments it wishes to include. Universities would not be forced to count the result of the new national assessment within each student's final degree marks. That said, given the importance of the assessment in determining the degree outcomes that a university can award (see Recommendation 4 below), the university may wish to include the result of the assessment in a student's final mark. To prevent universities from unduly focusing on the national assessment and 'teaching to the test' rather than delivering a varied and comprehensive degree course, each student's mark on the national assessment would be limited to a maximum of 10 per cent of their final degree result.

Recommendation 3

Each DAB must design a single, national assessment lasting approximately 3-4 hours for each degree course that will be taken by all students studying towards that degree in their final year. This assessment would be worth no more than 10 per cent of the final degree mark for each student.

Once the national assessment results have been collated, a profile of student marks across the country can be produced to show the spread of performance. The most sensible starting point is the proportion of classifications awarded before the grade inflation over the last 20 years began. In 1997, 7 per cent of students were awarded a First, 41 per cent a 2:1, 36 per cent a 2:2 and 9 per cent a Third. These proportions essentially generated a 'normal distribution' of degree classifications across the country. A simple metric could mirror this scenario by setting the national proportion of classifications in line with these previous results: 10/40/40/10 for each of the four classifications respectively. This would operate as a 'norm-referencing' system in which the proportions of final outcomes are fixed.

The profile of marks achieved by students at each HE provider would then be calculated, allowing the DAB to decide what proportion of Firsts, 2:1s, 2:2s and Thirds can be awarded by each institution. Each HE provider would have complete discretion as to which student receives each of their allotted degree classifications, irrespective of how well any given student performed on the national assessment overseen by the DAB. Degree courses that are directly linked to registration requirements for entering a profession (e.g. medical degrees) would still be allowed to award 'Pass/Fail' judgements instead.

Recommendation 4

The performance of students at each Higher Education provider on this new assessment will determine the proportions of each degree classification that the provider can award to that cohort of students. The proportion of classifications awarded at a national level for each subject would be: 10 per cent of students awarded a First; 40 per cent awarded a 2:1; 40 per cent awarded a 2:2; and 10 per cent awarded a Third.

4.2 Benefits of the new assessment model

The challenge set at the beginning of this chapter was to produce a system for awarding degrees that allows HE providers to maintain their status as autonomous and diverse institutions while ensuring that the standards for degree classifications are consistent across institutions and over time. A new approach that combines a single, national assessment while ensuring that the vast majority of a degree course is still made up of modules and assessments selected by each HE provider meets this benchmark.

The new assessments, along with the way in which degree classifications would be determined nationally, would create consistency and comparability in degree standards. This would mean that (unlike now) students, parents and universities would understand the value of each classification. Likewise, degree outcomes would become meaningful again for employers, whereas under the present system research has shown that employers are “not sure whether class of degree [is] a reliable indicator of quality across different institutions”¹⁵³ and degree classifications are “not assumed by employers to be indicative of a uniform national standard”.¹⁵⁴ Crucially, this new assessment model would also bring grade inflation to an end by ensuring that the degree classifications achieved by students would truly represent their achievements relative to their peers both within and between HE institutions.

Some universities may achieve higher proportions of good results in the new national assessments purely because they admit higher-achieving students to begin with. This would subsequently result in them being allowed to award higher proportions of the top degree classifications relative to other providers. There are two reasons to view this as a positive step. First, this new model would mean that being awarded a top classification would become a symbol of national achievement, much like an A or A* at GCSE or A-level. This contrasts with the present situation where a degree classification confers no objective information about a student’s achievement. Second, the introduction of national assessments would allow the Government to follow the innovations seen in school accountability through the addition of a genuine ‘value-added’ (VA) measure for universities.

Rather than simply measuring raw attainment (e.g. examination results), which tends to favour institutions that admit more students from high-achieving and/or advantaged backgrounds, VA measures take a different approach. They compare the progress made by students from the beginning to the end of their course against the progress made by other students who began with the same level of attainment (e.g. comparing the A-level grades of students who received the same GCSE results). Because we know the examination results at age 18 of students who start a degree, it would become possible to compare students at different HE providers who achieved the same examination results at 18 against each other in terms of their performance on the new national assessments. This would generate an objective way to measure the VA at each university, which would potentially identify universities that do not necessarily perform well in terms of attainment (i.e. degree outcomes) but have in fact delivered a high standard of teaching and learning.

¹⁵³ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Understanding Employers’ Graduate Recruitment and Selection Practices: Main Report*, BIS Research Paper No. 231:76.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, BIS Research Paper No. 231:15.

The OfS is currently considering how best to measure ‘learning gain’ but this “looks at how to measure improvements in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development made by students”¹⁵⁵ instead of assessing their academic progress during a degree course. The OfS, in partnership with the Department for Education, should instead introduce a new VA measure for universities that draws on the data generated by the national assessments in each subject. This will offer a direct measurement of the quality of teaching and support at each HE provider, which could prove immensely helpful to students, parents, employers and even government ministers. A genuine VA measure would also strongly incentivise providers to prioritise their teaching responsibilities – far more so than indirect assessments such as the TEF.

Recommendation 5

The Office for Students, supported by the Department for Education, should use the results of the new national assessments for each degree to produce a ‘value-added’ measure for each university that records the academic progress made by students during their degree course.

4.3 Areas for further consideration

The benefits of this new assessment model in terms of ending grade inflation, ensuring comparability of standards and moving towards a VA measure for universities together represent a considerable improvement on the current system. That said, there are some elements of the proposed new model that would need to be considered in more detail.

Deciding on the specificity with which to separate degree courses being overseen by DABs may lead to some discussion. For example, History degrees cover a wide range of time periods, geographical areas and topics. This could be addressed by having a single national examination that tests the ‘skills’ of all History students (e.g. analysing, interpreting and discussing generic source material) to identify the most able candidates. Alternatively, there could be separate national examinations for, say, ‘Modern History’, ‘Medieval History’ and ‘Ancient History’ based on a core curriculum. This is something that the appointed DAB would decide in liaison with HE representatives.

Another issue would be degree courses that have small numbers of students. In such circumstances, a DAB would still be appointed but the creation of a national examination may present logistical challenges. For relatively small subjects, the core curriculum designed for a closely-related degree could apply to them too. For example, students studying ‘Marine Zoology’ could be taught the new core curriculum for ‘Zoology’ as well (which might be covered through their existing degree courses in any case). For the smallest niche subjects that only attract a handful of students nationally, the proportion of degree classifications awarded to the university department within which it resides could be used to determine how many of each classification can be awarded to students studying the niche subject.

Joint-honours students may also require a slightly different approach. One solution would be for students to nominate the degree course in which they wish to sit the national assessment, seeing as these assessments would only cover the core curriculum in each case (which should be taught for each subject regardless). Another option would be for joint-honours students to sit the national assessments in both of their subjects to ensure that all students are treated equally by their HE provider. Should a joint-honours degree have a sufficiently large number of students on a national basis, it might be possible to create a separate national assessment for those students.

¹⁵⁵ Office for Students, ‘Learning Gain’, Webpage, April 2018.

This report proposes a split of 10/40/40/10 between the four degree classifications at a national level in each subject (Recommendation 4). However, some degree courses attract a higher share of high-performing students in terms of A-level grades. As Ofqual does with GCSEs and A-levels, the proportions of degree classifications available nationally in each subject could be adjusted to take this into account. For example, if a subject at degree level attracts a disproportionately large share of high-achieving A-level students, the proportion of Firsts available could be increased from 10 per cent to, say, 15 per cent, while one or more of the other classifications could have its overall proportion reduced accordingly. While this would add an element of complexity to the new model, if such alterations were made in a fair and objective manner across subjects then it could add another useful dimension to the comparability of standards across the HE sector.

5 Conclusion

In February 2018 Louise Richardson, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford, described our HE system as “the envy of the world”.¹⁵⁶ If this is indeed true, one would expect to find a range of robust and effective mechanisms in place for monitoring quality, protecting standards and ensuring that students, parents and employers can trust the value of a university degree. The evidence presented in the report shows that no such mechanisms exist. When billions of pounds of taxpayer subsidies are being poured into universities each year, it cannot be right that the public have no way of knowing at present when and where that investment is delivering high-quality provision and value for money.

After two decades of uninterrupted grade inflation, it is reasonable to assume that leaving the responsibility for ending the inflation with universities will not have the desired effect. In a world of league tables, competition for students and high tuition fees, HE providers have no obvious incentive to reduce or reverse the seemingly relentless rise in top degree outcomes. Despite the claims made by UUK and others that the HE sector has a strong stake in maintaining standards, it appears that individual institutions have other ideas. As noted in the Introduction, the *Robbins Report* and *Dearing Report* supported the autonomy and freedom given to the HE sector in this country – something that this report endorses in principle. However, autonomy in the absence of accountability has led to a situation in which the degree classification awarded to students has, regrettably, become increasingly meaningless as a record of their achievement.

In 1963 the *Robbins Report* stated that one of its guiding principles was that “in any properly co-ordinated system of higher education the academic grading of individuals should depend upon their academic accomplishment rather than upon the status of the institution in which they have studied.”¹⁵⁷ This sentiment remains as important now as it was over 50 years ago. Likewise, the *Dearing Report* in 1997 recognised that the system of awarding degrees had to “[enable] those inside and outside higher education to have confidence in the effectiveness and fairness of the arrangements”.¹⁵⁸ This report has shown that ‘effectiveness’, ‘fairness’ and the notion of university grades relating solely to academic accomplishment are no longer the foundations on which our degree classification system rests.

To demonstrate their supposed commitment to better standards, universities will no doubt point towards sector-led initiatives related to their existing systems for quality assurance. These include the work being undertaken to improve the professional development of external examiners and help calibrate their judgements¹⁵⁹ as well as the on-going programme that aims to agree “sector-agreed criteria for degree classifications” and provide “guidance for institutions in controlling grade inflation”.¹⁶⁰ Such schemes do not address the significant weaknesses in the current quality assurance processes described in this report. On that basis, they cannot and will not prevent individual institutions from prioritising their own interests (both academic and financial) above the needs of students and society more broadly, yet this is precisely the problem that needs to be solved.

¹⁵⁶ Louise Richardson, ‘Britain’s Universities Are Assets, Not a Problem to Be Solved’, *Financial Times*, 23 February 2018.

¹⁵⁷ Robbins, *The Report Of The Committee On Higher Education*, 8.

¹⁵⁸ Dearing, *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education*, 142.

¹⁵⁹ Higher Education Academy, ‘Degree Standards: Professional Development and Calibration for the External Examining System in the UK’.

¹⁶⁰ UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, ‘Protecting the Comparability of Degree Standards’, Webpage, January 2018.

This report has proposed a new model for determining degree classifications in this country. While the proposals may appear radical, they fall well short of introducing a 'national curriculum' for all degree courses. Instead, this report has opted for a reform package that offers a better balance of autonomy and accountability by leaving a large proportion of what HE delivers untouched while still injecting the consistency and comparability into degree standards that is sorely lacking at present. While universities will almost certainly prefer to maintain the status quo, the *Dearing Report* demanded that the HE sector "be as ready to question conventions about what is desirable or possible in the way it operates, as it is to question established wisdom through academic enquiry."¹⁶¹ We couldn't agree more.

¹⁶¹ Dearing, *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education*, 8.

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ISBN 978-1-910850-20-6