



Degree Outcomes Statement 2021-22

Item	Description
Document Reference:	PL.0054-v001
Document Name:	Degree Outcomes Statement 2021-22
Review Date:	April 2023
Last Reviewed:	March 2022
	Administrative review: 03/2022
Commencement Date:	03/2022
Approving Authority:	Education Committee
Date Approved:	
Department Responsible for maintenance & review:	Student, Library and Academic Services, Quality and Teaching Excellence
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The following is a statement on the degree classification profile at Northumbria University. Initial data analysis informed an internal institutional review which is one of a number of ways in which the Office for Students' (OfS) ongoing conditions of registration and the underpinning expectations of the Quality Code for Higher Education (QCHE) relating to protecting the value of qualifications and academic standards are met. The Northumbria Degree Outcome Statement includes data relating to the period most directly impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic.

1. Institutional degree classification profile

Between 2016/7 and 2020/1 there has been an increase in the percentage of upper degrees awarded. The table below summarises the change in upper degrees alongside data relating to changes in the attainment gap, the average entry points, and Staff-Student Ratios (SSRs) for the same period.

Segment	2016/7	2017/8	2018/9	2019/0	2020/1
NU Higher First Degrees (%)	76.2%	76.5%	77.9%	82.5%	81.7%
NU Higher First Degrees / NU All First Degrees (#)	(4360/5724)	(4300/5623)	(3885/4990)	(3886/4713)	(3903/4777)
Degree classification First (#)	1659	1754	1612	1778	1782
Upper second (#)	2701	2546	2273	2108	2121
Lower second (#)	1070	1042	856	711	768
Third/Pass degree (#)	294	281	249	116	106
UK Higher Degrees Rank (Times Good University Guide)	48	51	49	49	TBC**
BAME attainment gap (against white)	-23.5%	-22.3%	-18.7%	-13.4%	-12.7%
International attainment gap (against Home)	-22.5%	-23.7%	-18.4%	-14.2%	-12.6%
Gender attainment gap (Female against male)	2.2%	3.2%	1.0%	2.0%	3.3%
Mature attainment gap (against young)	-10.4%	-10.5%	-12.1%	-8.7%	-10.2%
POLAR 1 attainment gap (against POLAR4 2-5)*	-3.0%	-9.0%	-6.2%	-6.5%	-7.6%
POLAR 1+2 attainment gap (against POLAR4 3-5)*	-2.8%	-8.8%	-5.8%	-7.2%	-8.1%
Gap FY vs L4 entry	1.6%	4.4%	3.0%	4.3%	6.1%

Average entry tariff points	145.0	144.8	143.3	139.1	134.3
Entry Point rank - English HEIs (Times Good University Guide)	30	30	29	30	TBC**
Student Staff Ratio	16.7	16.3	15.5	15.5	15.7

* POLAR 1 is a measure of socioeconomic disadvantage

** To be confirmed pending publication of the Times Good University Guide 2023 due to be published in September 2022

Between 2016/7 and 2020/1 upper degrees have increased by 5.5 percentage points. This increase is attributable to several factors, most notably a strategy with a focus on improving and maintaining high entry quality – Northumbria now consistently ranks in the top 30 among English universities for entry points, rising from 45th position in 2011/12. Over the same period Northumbria also has an improved SSR moving from 16.7 to 15.7, and a growing year on year Foundation Year intake, alongside a step-change in the quality of foundation year entrants with those students now achieving greater levels of success on graduation for each of the last six years.

Analysis of the data shows that favourable progress has been made in addressing attainment gaps for BAME students and international students. Attainment for International BAME students has improved by almost 16% points over the period, noting that the very strong performance of the small white international cohort in 2020/21 means a gap persists. More significantly, the data also shows that gaps persist in some areas of the subset data and have increased moderately for some groups including male students and students from the lowest participation areas. These areas will be the focus of targeted work which will complement the university’s stated commitments in our Access and Participation Plan.

Targeted interventions and impact evaluation have been critical to addressing gaps in student attainment. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives directed at all aspects of the student journey are increasingly important elements of the University’s Strategy 2018/23. The University’s Access and Participation Plan (APP) for the period from 2020-21 to 2024-25 commits to an institution-wide, strategic approach, ‘fostering a culture where diversity is valued and encouraged, where we advance equality of opportunity, and all colleagues and students feel respected’. Northumbria’s APP, which was approved by the Office for Students (OfS), includes ambitious targets to reduce significantly gaps in continuation, attainment and progression by 2024/25, all of which are integrated aspects of the Education Strategic Plan 2018/23.

The percentage of good degrees was on an upward trajectory before the pandemic, having increased by 4.6% between 2018/19 and 2019/20. In March 2020 the University invoked its Emergency Regulations, and in line with the sector moved to on-line delivery and learning, and applied ‘reasonable adjustments’ to assessment. This incorporated implementing alternative assessments for examinations, including a move to 24 hour take-away papers. Where possible, normal assessment protocols were followed, and any adjustments were carefully considered to balance the need to protect standards with the desire to ensure that students were not disadvantaged by the circumstances caused by the pandemic. The degree classification calculation is highly automated (see section 4), but examination boards considered every student profile in order to determine evidence of material difference in performance pre- and post-pandemic to determine appropriate outcomes and mitigation. This practice was also applied to students graduating in 2020/21.

2. Assessment and marking practices

Northumbria's Assessment for Learning and Achievement pillar (see section 5) emphasises alignment between assessment and marking and Programme Learning Outcomes (PLOs). It includes guidance on the consistent use of grade descriptors, marking schemes and assessment criteria, assessment briefs, feedback standards and approval of assessment tasks. Student views on assessment and feedback are monitored throughout the year

In line with sector good practice, external examiners complete an institutional induction and actively engage in the approval of assessment tasks, the moderation of student work at module level and overall outcomes at programme level to confirm assessment quality and standards. These activities have been offered on a virtual basis for some

year in order to allow externals to refresh their understanding and refamiliarise themselves with the University's expectations on a regular basis. Programme Assessment Boards (PABs) consider feedback from external

examiners, student profiles and adherence to regulations in confirming student progression and awarding degrees. Marking practice and standards have been monitored through annual programme review and will continue to be reviewed by CPPR, the outcomes of which are scrutinised at Education Committee.

The Technology Enhanced Learning pillar of PFNA (see section 5) confirms that the University has well-established practices for the Electronic Management of Assessment (EMA), staff guidance, and training, all of which are centrally managed to ensure consistency of standards. All academic staff are required to achieve HEA fellowship, for which assessment and feedback is a core area of activity, and CPD sessions on these specific topics are a requirement of staff development. The University also delivers a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice (PGHEP) for new academic staff which includes a focus on assessment and marking. The Teaching Excellence website offers guidance on assessment design and exemplars of good practice. There are also tailored assessment practice sessions delivered to specific disciplines with an increasing emphasis on experiential learning.

Data from annual reports submitted by External Examiners for 2019/20 indicated that over 90 percent of external examiners confirmed that the University's approach to assessment and feedback was consistent with sector norms. This strongly indicates that external examiner induction and support is robust and that assessment processes are effective and efficient overall.

3. Academic governance and processes

Overseen by the Board of Governors and the University Executive, the University manages its portfolio and curriculum through Academic Board, Education Committee and Academic Portfolio

Group as part of its [governance structure](#). There is a university-wide approach to regulations, all of which are overseen and approved by Academic Board. The roles, remit and purpose of the University's governing committees and organisational structures are clearly defined and subject to regular review.

Northumbria's [Quality and Standards Framework](#) articulates the overarching processes and governance context for managing quality and standards. Programme and partnership approval and review processes (CPPR and periodic) ensure standards are defined, monitored and maintained. Approval and review documentation, including panel guidance and checklists, are designed to articulate and confirm that Northumbria's programmes meet external requirements (including Degree Apprenticeship standards), and to ensure the quality, currency and consistency of awards over time. Student involvement is integral to this ongoing process. All programmes at Northumbria have been re-approved since 2015/6.

Our approach to annual monitoring activity has been recalibrated and strengthened to be more systematic, accountable and data informed as a result of the introduction of Continuous Programme Performance Review (CPPR). CPPR is part of the Review strand of the Northumbria Quality and Standards Framework and is a key part of the following related processes:

- Institutional performance review and quality and standards monitoring for Board of Governors
- Partner performance review (including Transnational Education, Degree Apprenticeships)
- Periodic Review

CPPR provides us with a robust and dynamic quality and student-focused assurance and enhancement tool and has been phased in from September 2021 as the single process for reviewing modules, programmes and, as appropriate, subjects. CPPR offers a single place for standardised data, review and reporting and provides time

relevant data to support specific foci including the Office for Students' EDI requirements. Critical to the success of the revised approach is the opportunity for student voice feedback at all review points.

Adherence to the National Qualifications Framework, QAA Subject Benchmarks and PSRB requirements is confirmed by external, discipline-specific input to all approval and review panels. The external panel member is approved through institutional QA processes (updated in 2017) which ensure impartiality. External advice and guidance are also provided by external examiners, relevant professional bodies and employer networks relating to practice. Partnership approval and review sits within this framework, with partner programmes considered annually alongside the equivalent programmes delivered in Newcastle.

To ensure external assurance and scrutiny, the perspectives of senior external colleagues are currently being sought to review Northumbria's Degree Outcomes Statement.

4. Classification algorithms

The algorithm for the classification of an honours degree is applied consistently to all students across the University and is detailed in the [Academic Regulations for Taught Awards](#), section 5.10. Awards

are calculated automatically with examination board discretion applied only where there are approved extenuating circumstances. Final year Programme Assessment Boards (PABs) (which include external examiners) provide oversight of all outcomes. Students have access to on-line guidance ('Understanding your academic results' on the student portal) and to information in their Programme Handbook.

Currently the degree classification algorithm is based on either final year marks or a combination of levels 5 and 6, whichever is more favourable to the student. Students are considered for a higher classification where their average marks place them within 2% of the higher class, with the exception of marks between a first class and second class upper division where the requirement is 3%. The higher classification is awarded where the student's profile of marks meets the requirements set out in the [Academic Regulations](#), section 5.10.

Following the most recent change to the algorithm (2016), the University saw a 4.9% increase in students graduating with Upper Degrees. In particular, the performance of Widening Participation students increased. We interpret this increase as being attributable to a number of factors as detailed in section 1, such as improved student entry profiles and changes to programme delivery, as well as to the impact of a new programme design framework (see section 5). Changes to the current regulations were agreed as detailed in section 6 and have been implemented in 2020/21. The impact of the proposed changes has been modelled and is likely to result in a reduction in the number of upper degrees. Northumbria will monitor (in line with objectives in the APP) the impact of agreed changes on existing attainment gaps through Education Committee.

In line with other Universities, Northumbria has established threshold rules for students to be eligible for a re-sit in a module. Full time undergraduate students are required to meet a level average across all graded modules of 35% at levels 5 and 6 and 30% at level 4. The lower threshold at level 4 is a transition support measure for students who are new to Higher Education. Due to the diversity of students undertaking part-time study, part-time students are permitted to re-sit all failed modules with no requirement to achieve a level average.

5. Programme design, teaching practices and learning resources

Northumbria's [Programme Framework for Northumbria Awards \(PFNA\)](#), introduced in 2015/16, ensures all programmes at the point of design and approval are subject to standard criteria. The Framework has four pillars:

research informed learning; employability; assessment for learning and achievement, and technology enhanced learning. PFNA underpins the aim that all Northumbria Graduates are prepared for employment or future study. In 2020 an explicit commitment to inclusivity was added to the framework to bring focus to issues of diversity, inclusion, decolonisation and globalisation. The [Northumbria graduate characteristics](#) are the shared outcome of all Northumbria Programmes, providing a synergy between Northumbria's research and teaching excellence.

The academic-led Teaching Excellence team have continued to provide CPD sessions and support to academic staff throughout the year. All academic staff participate in a peer observation and support scheme which delivers 1-1 mentoring on academic practice and is part of a wider mechanism for

identifying good practice. The Teaching Excellence Team, in collaboration with the Technology Enhanced Learning Team, developed support and guidance for academic colleagues in learning and teaching delivery and management assessment in an emergency scenario

The [University Library](#) (which achieves some of the highest student satisfaction levels in the UK) works closely with academic colleagues to develop the [library collections](#) to meet the University's education and research needs, including one-to-one desk-side visits to academic colleagues and the development and maintenance of online reading lists. It offers [study skills support](#) sessions and drop-in appointments, as well as working with academics to develop inductions and other provision tailored to particular programmes and subject areas. Sometimes students face challenges in finding appropriate places to study at home and the Library offers an alternative which is open 24/7. Students greatly value the skills support, and this is evident in positive NSS outcomes in this area.

Blackboard Ultra is the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), a system that enables the provision of all learning materials and resources to students as well as facilitating communication/collaboration and evaluating student progress. Lectures are recorded and made available to students via this platform. Alongside Northumbria's ongoing commitment to technology enhanced learning, the University has also invested significantly in its campus to support high quality learning and teaching.

A Student Engagement team, alongside our Student Life and Wellbeing team work directly with students, and closely with academic personal tutors to support students, with a particular focus on identifying those 'at risk'. Timely interventions are designed to support students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes, alongside supporting their resilience, health and wellbeing.

6. Identifying actions

The University is committed to active review and continuous improvement of regulations and academic practice. A consultation on specific aspects of the regulations involving a wide range of stakeholders (including the Students' Union and external examiners) was most recently undertaken in late 2019. This sought to ensure that the threshold standards and criteria for awards continued to be consistent with current guidance, national frameworks and other UK providers. The University welcomed the UUK report for its sector wide illustration of assessment practices and has considered all aspects carefully. The consultation culminated in a workshop in January 2020, where the topics of compensation, resit opportunities, discounting of credit, borderline thresholds and the classification algorithm were discussed. This resulted in a proposal to Academic Board to change the Assessment Regulations as follows: remove the discount of credit so that awards are calculated on 120 credits per level; standardise the borderline thresholds; and move to a single algorithm for calculating the award. These proposals are in line with the recent UUK Guidance and will be introduced for new students (following consultation) from 2020/21.

In relation to the work on Degree Outcomes the data and the statement will be reviewed regularly. As noted above, Northumbria has also recently reviewed its annual programme monitoring process and replaced it with CPPR, aspects of the external examiner system, and the planned integration of the outcome classification descriptors, the outcomes

of which have been implemented with effect from 2020/21. The aim of these reviews is to ensure that issues arising from the degree outcomes data, particularly in relation to attainment gaps, are routinely and systematically considered and addressed internally and externally.

Figure 1 Firsts/2:1s v Entry Standards (Times GUG 2022)

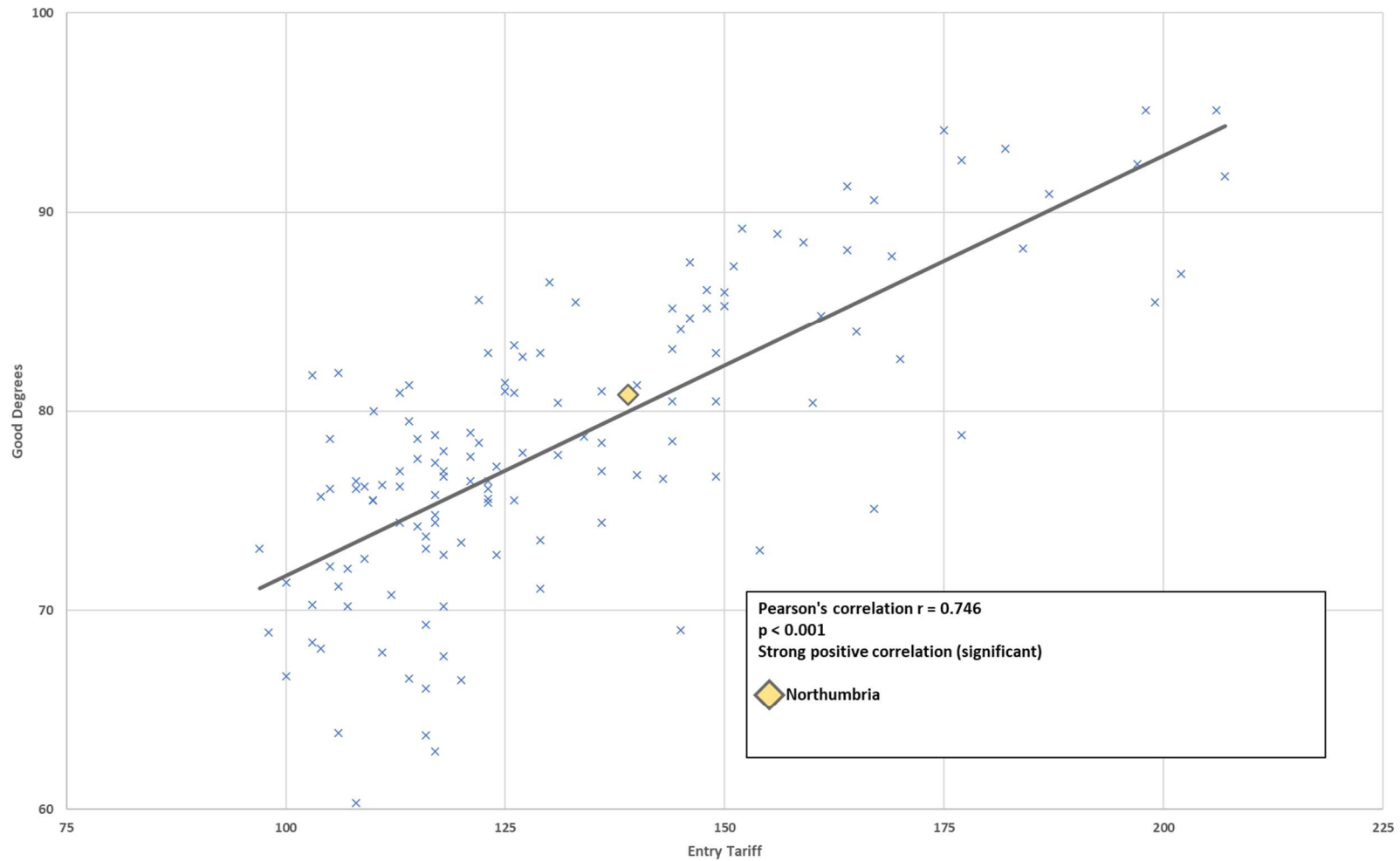


Figure 1 indicates the proportion of Higher Degrees versus Entry Tariffs for all providers included in the Times Good University Guide 2022. Northumbria's proximity to the trend line indicates that the university's position is broadly consistent with the sector trend and that there is a significant correlation between the two metrics.