1. INSTITUTIONAL DEGREE CLASSIFICATION PROFILE

The University is asked to set out quantitative trends in degree outcomes over five years, analysing student characteristics and subject mix.

The proportion of students awarded good honours degrees (defined as either First Class Honours or Upper Second Class Honours) increased from 68.9% in 2015/16 to 82.9% in 2019/20. There were modest increases every year from 2015/16 up until 2018/19, which had a slight dip at 72.8%. The rise to 82.9% in 2019/20 is attributable to a number of factors, including changes to assessment strategies which have seen better alignment between assessment types and many students’ previous experiences of vocational qualifications, students’ extremely positive engagement with their studies and assessments during the global pandemic, and the partial closing of differential attainment gaps. The University also made some temporary adjustments to its assessment regulations and procedures to ensure no detriment to students as a consequence of the pandemic.

Degree outcomes vary between faculties, with Health, Psychology and Social Care seeing the highest proportion of good honours degrees in 2019/20 (86.7%) and Business and Law the lowest (80.5%). The proportion of students attaining a good honours degree varies across different ethnicity groups at Manchester Met. In 2019/20, 70.5% of black students achieved a good honours degree, compared with 73.1% of Asian students, 87.2% of white students and 79.6% of other/mixed ethnicity.

These gaps have decreased significantly over the last five years, and we remain committed to reducing these further. A key contribution to this work is the University’s Inclusive Learning Communities project. This project aims to address the differences between white students and Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students being awarded a 1st or 2:1 degree classification by working collaboratively with staff and students to increase our BAME students’ sense of belonging to the University and to change the way they are included in our teaching practices. The entry qualifications of students also affect degree outcomes, with 87.2% of students entering with academic qualifications (e.g. A Levels) achieving good honours degrees in 2019/20, compared with 75.3% of students with vocational (e.g. BTEC) qualifications.

Manchester Metropolitan has a proud track-record in Access and Widening Participation. It has a diverse undergraduate student profile and recruits and supports high numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In line with requirements from the Office for Students (OfS), the University has produced an Access and Participation Plan (APP) that focuses on actions to address differential student outcomes through an integrated and holistic approach to student support and success. A key aim set out in the APP is to achieve progressive and planned reductions in gaps in good degree outcomes based on ethnicity and social disadvantage, so that they are eliminated completely by 2030/31.

The University is committed to ensuring students with a disability, students from estranged backgrounds and students who are care leavers are supported to the best of its ability during their time at the University. The University targets and supports
students through its First Generation programme, which supports students whose parents did not attend university into and through Manchester Met.

The University’s Education Strategy supports the activities and themes set out in the Access and Participation Plan, for example through the RISE programme and the Academic Skills Unit (see section 5 for more detail on these areas).

2. ASSESSMENT AND MARKING PRACTICES

The University is asked to set out how it assures the institution’s assessment criteria meets sector reference points, including those set by OfS/HEFCQ and PSRBs, non-mandatory guidance and referencing use of external expertise.

The University has in place a well-established regulatory framework, which governs the structure and delivery of all awards. This framework is mapped against sector requirements and expectations, including those detailed within the Quality Code for Higher Education.

The Regulations for the Academic Awards of the University provide the definitive reference point for all awards offered by Manchester Met, their credit profile and academic level under the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). Under this sits the University’s new Curriculum and Assessment Framework, which was introduced in January 2018. The Framework outlines the detailed requirements regarding credit volume, structure and assessments for all academic programmes. Alignment with the relevant Framework is rigorously scrutinised at programme approval / re-approval to ensure that programmes meet the required standard and conform to structural expectations.

In response to the unique circumstances and challenges of the 2019/20 academic year, the University made appropriate adjustments to standard policies and procedures as well as operating outside of standard timelines. Wherever such adjustment has been implemented formal approval through appropriate governance structures and/or delegated authority has been sought. The actions taken in response to the crisis have been benchmarked against the relevant OfS guidance (https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/guidance-for-providers-about-quality-and-standards-during-coronavirus-pandemic/) to assure compliance with national expectations. Whilst cutting across a number of operational areas, all adjustments have been designed and delivered against consistent objectives:

• To ensure that the University’s academic awards retain their value, and that academic standards are not compromised.
• To enable students to engage with teaching and assessment in order to complete their studies.
• To safeguard the wellbeing of staff and students.

The University’s Assessment Regulations for Undergraduate, Taught Postgraduate and Postgraduate Research programmes contain definitive requirements for achievement of academic and practice credits, progression between the levels of study, calculation of degree classifications and conferment of awards.
In March 2020, a set of Emergency Assessment Regulations was approved by the Academic Board in response to the emerging Covid-19 situation. In developing the Emergency Assessment Regulations, the University’s priority was to ensure that decisions on student progression were based on reliable evidence of achievement. For final year students, the University adopted a rigorous ‘no detriment’ approach focused on alternative assessments and requiring students to achieve a threshold level of performance across Level 6 as a whole. To provide assurance regarding the maintenance of academic standards, a University-wide calibration exercise was carried out to map average unit performance over a four-year period, with opportunities for senior academic colleagues to implement appropriate adjustments where significant fluctuation was identified.

The University consulted extensively with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) regarding these exceptional adjustments to assessment, progression and classification, and where their application was not permissible under PSRB requirements, a programme-level exemption was agreed.

Adherence to the Assessment Regulations is assured through Assessment Boards, convened on behalf of the Academic Board and comprising senior academic staff and designated External Examiners. Assessment Boards continued to meet formally during 2019/20 - albeit via videoconferencing software - to oversee the maintenance of academic standards and equitability of outcomes for students. However, rather than conduct Boards on a departmental basis, Level 6 students were considered by Faculty-specific Boards. A single University-wide Board took place for confirming Level 7 awards. This approach to Boards ensured that student outcomes continued to be assessed in a transparent and equitable manner.

In 2019/20, the University had links with 60 PSRBs. Checks are carried out on an annual basis to ensure the Assessment Regulations meet the PSRB guidance and frameworks. In instances where a variation or exemption from the regulations may be required in order to meet PSRB criteria, a Request for Variation to / Exemption from the University Assessment Regulations must be submitted and approved by the Faculty Head of Education, Head of Assessment and Engagement Management and the Education Committee.

The University currently employs c.200 External Examiners for taught programmes delivered within and by the University, with all taught programmes having oversight by at least one independent examiner. Examiners monitor and review all academic provision (apart from Level 3 Foundation year) and work closely with academic teams to support the processes for verifying the standard of assessments, and moderating student work to ensure marks are applied consistently and at the appropriate level. External Examiners ensure institutional and subject level maintenance of threshold academic standards, in accordance with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and Subject Benchmark Statements. Chief External Examiners attend Assessment Boards and formally endorse their outcomes.

Despite the move to virtual Boards necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, Examiners continued to play a key role in the meetings - with all Boards including external representation. Through the provision of an annual report, Examiners affirm the ongoing maintenance of academic standards, comment on student performance and highlight any areas for enhancement. An annual overview of Examiner feedback
is provided to the Education Committee, with feedback also informing the Education Annual Review (EAR) process.

The University’s Verification Marking and Moderation Policy, which was approved in January 2020, ensures there is a standardised approach to both internal and external moderation and the role of External Examiners. In 2019/20, academic staff were asked to adopt a pragmatic and proportionate approach to internal and external moderation which allowed confidence that standards were being maintained across assignments and enabled the timely completion of marking.

Throughout 2019/20, the University has continued to play an active role in the AdvanceHE/OfS Degree Standards Project on External Examining. The University’s work in this area has been used by OfS/AdvanceHE as a case study to support the evaluation of the scheme. The accredited training programme, designed to support Manchester Met staff in obtaining roles as External Examiners within the sector, has been delivered to a wide range of academic colleagues – both through face to face and online sessions. Through participation in this scheme, over 150 Manchester Met staff have undertaken the accredited training programme designed to support them in obtaining roles as External Examiners within the sector. The University has specified criteria for the appointment of External Examiners which are detailed in the External Examining Policy.

3. ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE

The University is asked to cover how the institution’s governance structures provide assurance that the value of our qualifications is protected.

The University’s Academic Board retains ultimate oversight and accountability for all aspects of the University’s regulatory framework, as well as policies and procedures for assessment and examination of the academic performance of students and procedures for the award of qualifications. Academic Board is chaired by the University’s Vice-Chancellor. Membership includes the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Chief Operating Officer, Pro-Vice Chancellors, Faculty representatives and Students’ Union representatives. Whilst the development and/or approval of a number of sub-regulatory procedures may be delegated to its Committees or senior representatives, the Academic Board retains ultimate oversight and accountability for all aspects of the University’s regulatory framework.

The Education Committee has delegated responsibility for the oversight of all taught provision, including responsibility for the maintenance of academic quality and standards. Adherence to the University’s Assessment Regulations is assured through Assessment Boards, convened on behalf of the Academic Board, and comprising senior academic staff and designated External Examiners. Under the Procedures for the Conduct of Assessment Boards, Assessment Boards are attended by a Chief External Examiner, who is responsible for confirming their satisfaction with the standards and conduct of the Board, and with the integrity and equity of the University’s processes for conferring awards.

The Education Annual Review (EAR) process, which has been in place since 2017, assesses Departmental and Programme-level performance against institutional
objectives, and ensures appropriate levels of accountability for the Education Strategy KPIs. Education Annual Review meetings take place for each Department, chaired by the PVC Education and with scrutiny informed by a dataset and qualitative information. Actions are targeted around local enhancements to the student experience and progress towards achievement of the KPIs and tracked through Faculty and University committee structures. From 2019/20, EAR meetings will have authority to require programmes to submit for full re-approval.

One of the core sources that informs the EAR process is External Examiner feedback. Through provision of an annual report, External Examiners affirm the ongoing maintenance of academic standards, comment on student performance and highlight any areas for enhancement.

4. CLASSIFICATION ALGORITHMS

The University is asked to describe its classification algorithm and the rationale.

The University's Assessment Regulations for Undergraduate, Taught Postgraduate and Postgraduate Research programmes detail the University’s classification algorithm. Any proposed changes to the Regulations are scrutinised in detail by a working group of senior academic and professional services staff and elected Students’ Union officers, before ratified proposals are taken forward for approval through the committee structure. Changes are only implemented where there is demonstrable evidence that there will be no adverse impact upon the student experience, and that standards will continue to be maintained.

The classification algorithm referenced in the Assessment Regulations is applied across the Institution. There is no opportunity to exercise discretion when determining degree awards outside of what is detailed in the Assessment Regulations. Whilst the University applies the same classification algorithm to the overwhelming majority of its partnership arrangements, due to professional accreditation reasons a minority of partnership arrangements use an amended algorithm.

An additional classification method, whereby final degree classification was calculated using 50% from level 5 and 50% from level 6, was introduced for academic year 2019/20. While this change provided welcome assurance for students, it had very little impact on 2019/20 degree outcomes, with only 44 Level 6 students benefitting from application of the 50/50 calculation.

It is also worth noting that with effect from the 2019/20 academic year, the University reduced the re-assessment entitlement from two attempts to one attempt.

The University’s Student Life (https://www.mmu.ac.uk/student-life/teaching-and-learning/assessments) pages provide further information about assessments, including the University’s Assessment Regulations.

5. TEACHING PRACTICES AND LEARNING RESOURCES
The University is asked to cover whether there have been any enhancements to teaching, resources, support or curriculum that have impacted on degree classifications.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the University put significant work into moving teaching and learning online during 2019/20. Throughout 2019/20, and particularly in relation to the institutional response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the University Teaching Academy (UTA), which was created in April 2019, has played a crucial role in supporting the development of educational practice, promoting innovative teaching and assessment approaches, and informing institutional thinking about the organisation of education. Throughout this period the UTA, alongside the Technology Enhanced Learning team, has continued to develop and embed a wide range of resources to support electronic delivery and assessment, face-to-face general and specialist delivery in socially distanced teaching spaces as well as activities and support in relation to enabling career development, enhancing performance, facilitating leadership and supporting curriculum development. Support has included online tutorials, webinars, toolkits and packages of support to help academic staff to deliver teaching and student support online.

Owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, the University's focus shifted during academic year 2019/20 to preparing for teaching in academic year 2020/21. The University developed plans during 2019/20 to deliver block teaching for academic year 2020/21. Block teaching involves teaching units consecutively, as opposed to the more usual academic year structure at Manchester Met, where several units are timetabled simultaneously. The main principle of block teaching is that students study 30 credits over a six-week period, and are then assessed immediately after the block, in the seventh week. The main benefits of block teaching are that it minimises students' on campus, classroom-based contacts and it also minimises the disruption for students and staff if there is a need to switch quickly between on campus and online delivery.

The University has continued to pursue other pieces of development work, including the Student-Centred Curriculum Programme, which is focused on changing the way Manchester Met structures and delivers its undergraduate programmes. The University has also developed its RISE programme, which provides students the opportunity to tailor their studies and get involved in a wide range of experiences to learn new skills, earn credits towards their degree and shape their future career. Students have access to a variety of options that could improve their marks and performance, including but not limited to, studying or volunteering in another country, gaining work experience or learning a new language. In many activities the University has made financial support available to cover placement and mobility costs. The pilot offer was launched during 2018/19 to a positive reception. The project has been reformulated in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, not only to continue to meet its existing commitments to students, but also to expand capacity significantly. It included providing online alternatives for participants and creating a series of 'learning pathways.' These have unlimited capacity and are now being offered to the remaining original applicants and as part of the University's broader engagement strategy to its full population.

The University is committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of its students, and offers a range of support, including appointments with our specialist
teams, who can make recommendations based on a student’s needs and make referrals to other support services, group wellbeing workshops and courses, online self-help information and wellbeing podcasts. The support services that students have access to during their time at the University include:

- Counselling, Health & Wellbeing, which provides individual counselling and mental health support.
- Student Hubs, which provide a first point of contact for all student matters, including finance, timetables and careers advice, and refer to specialist support if required.
- Academic and Study Skills, which supports students by running self-selecting provision such as one-to-one appointments, workshops and drop-ins, as well as offering bespoke input into units.
- Disability Service, which works with students to provide advice and information about the support that is available to them.
- Library workshops, which help with studies and research skills.

During the academic year 2019/20 the University offered support services both on campus and remotely in order to support students during the pandemic. In addition, a raft of additional online resources and activities were developed to support students during this challenging period. This included virtual ‘Your Student Life Essentials’ events during September 2020 and a bespoke programme of activities for self-isolating students focused on wellbeing. Further information about these additional resources is available on the University’s Student Life pages.

The University continues to make a considerable investment in transforming its estate to ensure that it is fit for purpose, enhances the student experience and supports the highest quality research and training.

The academic year 2019/20 was a period of unprecedented change. The University will review the impact and efficiency of these changes through its usual governance routes to ensure their impact on degree outcomes is evaluated.

6. IDENTIFYING GOOD PRACTICE AND ACTIONS

The University is asked to state examples of good practice in any aspect of classification.

Institutional wide assessment regulations have been in place for many years, along with associated policies and procedures. The University has robust mechanisms in place to ensure its regulations, policies and procedures are rigorously reviewed. Assessment regulations are managed through core University systems.

The Education Annual Review (EAR) process, referenced in section 3, is an effective method of identifying improvements for assessment and marking that has direct input from the Students’ Union. Actions from the EARs are followed up with focused professional development opportunities that are always aimed at improving assessment literacy and decision-making.
As described in section 3, External Examiners play a key role in verifying the standard of assessments and sharing best practice from across the sector. External Examiners are asked to note examples of good practice in their annual reports. These reports are sent to Programme Leaders and academic managers, and the examples of good practice are reflected in the analysis presented to EAR meetings. Staff engagement with the AdvanceHE/OfS Degree Standards Project on External Examining has had a positive impact on the assessment literacy of the University’s staff and has improved practices.

7. RISKS AND CHALLENGES

The full impact of students being taught online for periods of the 2019/20 academic year has yet to be fully determined. With the restrictions associated with Covid-19 extending into academic year 2020/21, there will be a requirement to evaluate the University’s approach to both assessment and student support, taking into consideration the lessons learned from the pandemic. Planning for teaching and assessments with the uncertainties of the pandemic presents an obvious challenge for the University.

The University strategically assesses its taught portfolio according to metrics and performance as part of its drive to improve quality, consistency and the student experience. In addition to this, the University continually strives to improve how it supports its students both in their academic work and wider student life. It is a reasonable assumption that these activities will impact the University’s degree outcomes and may well result in an increased number of good honours awards.

The University is committed to developing its understanding of what factors can affect student performance, (e.g. socio-economic, entry qualifications, ethnicity) to address differential student degree attainment and graduate outcomes. The University’s Access and Participation Plan and Education Strategy are focused on building on the University’s strong foundations in these areas and making further improvements.

The University has made significant progress with supporting student progression and will continue to review ways it can help and support more students to progress to their next academic year of study, in particular for Level 4 students progressing to Level 5. This support covers both academic and pastoral support services.