MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

DEGREE OUTCOMES STATEMENT 2020/21

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 70.4% in 2016/17 to 82.5% in 2020/21, which was a slight decrease from 82.9% in 2019/20. There were modest increases every year from 2016/17 up until 2018/19, which had a slight dip at 72.8%. The overall rise in good honours degrees over this five-year period 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 and the partial closing of differential attainment gaps.

Within the University’s good honours awards the proportion of First Class degree awards increased from 41.9% in 2019/20 to 45.3% in 2020/21\(^1\), whereas Upper Second Class honours reduced from 41% in 2019/20 to 37.2% in 2020/21. The 3.8% rise in first class degree awards from 2019/20 to 2020/21 masks a differentiated position across the University. At a local level, some programmes saw a decrease in the number of First Class degree awards, other programmes saw a modest increase, and others more marked increases. This is mainly attributable to changes to the academic delivery model in 2020/21 which had different teaching and assessment consequences for different academic programmes. In addition, the application of contextualised marking for Level 5 students in 2019/20 to support them during the pandemic contributed to an uplift of First Class degree awards for some of the University’s programmes.

Degree outcomes vary between faculties, with Arts and Humanities seeing the highest proportion of good honours degrees in 2020/21 (85.3%) and Business and Law the lowest (79.1%). The entry qualifications of students affect degree outcomes, with 88.1% of students entering with academic qualifications (e.g. A Levels) achieving good honours degrees in 2020/21, compared with 72.6% of students with vocational (e.g. BTEC) qualifications.

The proportion of students attaining a good honours degree varies across different ethnicity groups at Manchester Met. In 2020/21, 69.3% of black students achieved a good honours degree, compared with 71.7% of Asian students, 87.3% of white students and 80.5% of mixed ethnicity.

Award gaps have decreased significantly over the last five years, and we remain committed to reducing these further. A key contributor to this work is the University’s

\(^{1}\) The University’s internal figure for First Class degree awards differs from the figure published by OfS (44.9%) in its “Analysis of degree classifications over time: Changes in graduate attainment from 2010-11 to 2020-21.” This is because the University’s internal figure looks at all UG degree graduates, whereas the OfS filters to a population of full-time, UG degree, UK-domiciled graduates.
Inclusive Learning Communities project. This project aims to address the differences between white students and Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students being awarded a First Class or Upper Second Class Honours 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. In addition, the University collaborates with the Students Union on the BAME Ambassador Scheme, which is student-led and aims to improve student experience and close the awarding gap for BAME students. The Scheme develops and delivers campaigns and events for students, as well as linking with university staff and the Union to feedback students’ views to influence positive change on campus.

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 First Generation Scholarship Programme won the Widening Participation and Outreach Initiative of the Year prize at the Times Higher Education 2021 awards.

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 Curriculum and Assessment Framework, which outlines the detailed requirements regarding credit volume, structure and assessments for all academic programmes. Alignment with the relevant Framework is scrutinised at
programme approval/re-approval to ensure that all programmes meet the required standard and conform to structural expectations. Where variations from this Framework are requested, a strong rationale - in most instances alignment to professional body requirements - is needed and approval considered by the Education Committee.

The 2020/21 academic year, and the ongoing disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, presented a series of unique and significant challenges to the University. Having made a number of temporary adjustments to standard policies, procedures and timelines as part of the immediate response in spring 2020, the rapidly changing national and regional context necessitated a similar level of institutional flexibility throughout the 2020/21 academic year. Wherever such adjustments were required, formal approval through appropriate governance structures and/or delegated authority was sought. In all cases, including decisions relating to the practical delivery of teaching, the University’s position was informed by the relevant guidance from the Office for Students and/or Department for Education.

A dedicated Covid Outbreak Response Group, chaired by the Chief Operating Officer and reporting to the University Executive Group, met throughout the academic year to co-ordinate the institutional response and review the alignment of policy and operational decisions against national frameworks. Adjustments to policies, procedures and operations were informed by the following objectives:

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

Through academic and Professional Services networks, staff engagement as External Examiners and through discipline-specific fora, staff from across Manchester Met routinely monitor and feed-back to the University on sector developments and practice. Through this feedback, the University has been able to benchmark the range of adjustments to policies, regulations and procedures detailed in this paper against sector practice – and retains a high degree of assurance that the adjustments approved are proportionate and consistent with those implemented elsewhere across the sector.

The University’s Assessment Regulations for Undergraduate, Taught Postgraduate and Postgraduate Research programmes contain definitive requirements for the achievement of academic and practice credits, progression between the levels of study, calculation of degree classifications and the conferment of awards. Having implemented a set of Emergency Assessment Regulations in March 2019, the University returned to its substantive Assessment Regulations at the start of the 2020/21 academic year. Following the announcement of a further national ‘lockdown’ on 4 January 2021, and the requirement for teaching of all but a small number of health and education-related programmes to move online, the University, in consultation with the Students’ Union, rapidly implemented adjustments to the standard progression rules in order to support students. This entailed the reinstatement of a whole-level approach to progression, whereby students progressed between the levels of study contingent upon achievement of a level average of 40% across the full 120 credits and passing at least 90 credits, rather than requiring passes in all individual units. Given the disruption caused by the pandemic in academic year 2020/21, students who had a single failed unit were able to
progress if they had not engaged with all assessments in the 2020/21 academic year and had a level average above 40%. In order to ensure parity between students on 30 and 15-credit units, the University allowed students with fail decisions to progress where they had a level average of 40% and had failed more than one unit but totalling no more than 30 credits overall. The University provided additional support for students who were trailing a fail into academic year 2021/22, for example via study skills sessions. To ensure that the University’s academic awards retained their value, the University agreed to make minimal adjustments for final year students, reintroducing the additional 50:50 classification method to sit alongside the existing 25:75, rather than implementing any broader ‘no detriment’ approach. The University also used Level 6 profiling for final year students. These changes were consistent with the OfS guidance that “[Universities] should continue to consider appropriate ‘safety nets’ for individual students affected by the pandemic…with such safety nets in place, you may determine that it is no longer necessary to implement the type of ‘no detriment’ policies put in place by some providers in 2019-20.”

As the adjustments that were implemented aligned to those used in 2019-20, programme-level exemptions remained in place where Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body requirements meant that the adjustments were not permissible.

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. Having rapidly adapted the institutional approach to Assessment Boards in response to the disruption created by Covid-19 during 2019/20, the Academic Board agreed in July 2020 to retain this model for 2020/21, with the operation of virtual University-wide Boards, chaired by the PVC Education, for the vast majority of Level 3, 4 and 5 students, and with Level 6 students considered by faculty-specific Boards.

Whilst University-wide Boards operated extremely effectively in 2019/20, the operational context of 2020/21 proved far more challenging. The disruption to academic delivery caused by recurrent local and national restrictions led to a significant increase in late or non-submission of assessment by students and an exponential increase in the number of Exceptional Factors submissions, all of which resulted in an unusually large number of incomplete student profiles at Board, and concomitant increase in Chair’s Action decisions. For the 2021/22 academic year, the University reverted to its substantive Terms of Reference for Assessment Boards, with Boards operating at a faculty level, and introduction of standardised approach to ‘pre-Boards’ which have previously differed in operation between different departments.

In 2020/21, the University had links with 57 PSRBs. When there are changes to PSRB guidance and/or frameworks, or where the University updates Assessment Regulations, checks are carried out to ensure alignment. 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, with all taught programmes having oversight from at least one independent examiner. The University prioritises the
appointment of External Examiners working at Senior Lecturer level or above, and from those institutions which have a strong track record in the relevant subject area(s).

Examiners monitor and review all academic provision to ensure the ongoing maintenance of academic standards, alignment with national and international expectations and subject currency. They 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. Chief External Examiners attend Assessment Boards and formally endorse their outcomes. 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 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.

Throughout the last academic year, the University has continued to play an active role in the OfS/AdvanceHE Degree Standards Project, which ran from 2016 to July 2021. 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 Professional Development Course, designed to support 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.

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 had 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.

The University reduced the re-assessment entitlement from two attempts to one attempt from academic year 2019/20.

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.
Launched in 2017 as the Student Centred Curriculum Project and Third Term programme, RISE curates and credits a range of activity focusing on employability, confidence building, and mental wellbeing. RISE is open to all students but is proactive in encouraging students at risk of disengaging from the University, or from poor employment outcomes. While the long-term impact of RISE on students will take some time to show in Graduate Outcomes data, lead indicators are positive, and suggest a strong improvement in ‘career readiness’ in students who take part in RISE.

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is group learning where students reflect on course content and share knowledge and skills with each other through activities run by a PAL leader from a higher year of study. This creates both an academic support network with new students and a learning community for students. Traditionally, the scheme concentrates on first-year students to help them to transition into university. PAL sessions appear on student’s timetables weekly. Two PAL leaders facilitate these sessions and focus on the challenging areas in the course material and study skills. The session’s agenda is dictated by the students who attend, based on their current academic work.

‘My Five-Year Plan’ (My 5YP) launched in September 2021 and provides undergraduate students with a detailed framework which starts from induction and continues through to two years after graduation, with clear routes that boost both personal and professional development. Planned benefits include a dynamic and well-managed personal tutor and student learning community, and improved graduate outcomes and alumni take-up. My 5YP works with existing University services, such as RISE. Students will be encouraged to complete at least one My 5YP cycle per academic year, with support from their personal tutor.

Throughout 2020/21, and particularly in relation to the institutional response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the University Teaching Academy (UTA) has played a crucial role in supporting the development of educational practice, promoting innovative and effective approaches to teaching and assessment, and informing institutional thinking about the organisation of education. Throughout this period the UTA has continued to develop and disseminate a wide range of resources and support activities. This has included 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.

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, and developed plans 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, minimises the disruption for students and staff if there is a need to switch quickly between on campus and online delivery, and means students are studying one unit at a time providing a less complicated experience. This academic delivery model enabled
the University respond quickly and effectively to changing restrictions around social distancing, contact tracing, international travel and localised lockdowns during academic year 2020/21.

Throughout 2020-21 there were high levels of volatility for staff and students. Manchester Metropolitan was one of the first universities in England to start its academic teaching in September, and was therefore one of the first to experience a rising positive infection rate amongst its students with subsequent periods of self-isolation on an individual and collective residences basis. This had a considerable impact on educational delivery with all level 3 and 4 teaching moving online in October 2020, then subsequently moving all teaching online with other Greater Manchester Higher Education institutions. As the whole of the UK went into lockdown in November 2020, and then into 2021, the University implemented national directives on limited access to on-campus teaching for specific groups of students. From March 2021 the University managed the reintroduction of on-campus teaching sessions for practice-based programmes in line with government guidance.

The scale of student self-isolation in the autumn term required the University to take additional steps to support students. This included online study skill workshops and online wellbeing sessions. The Peer-Assisted Learning teams (PALS) proactively contacted students, making phone calls and online connections to those who were self-isolating. The RISE programme also targeted isolating students, making deliveries of materials to support engagement and positive mental health, as well as beginning work on the development of online intensive activities that would continue throughout the year and keep students engaged with the University through a difficult period. In addition, a range of virtual work-based learning opportunities were offered across the institution by RISE and within faculties. Interventions were also developed by the Academic Study Skills team to facilitate students’ transition and support numeracy and literacy to close skills gaps.

The block teaching delivery model has continued during academic year 2021/22. The University undertook a review of its academic delivery model during 2021/22, which included an analysis of approaches taken by other institutions and engagement the academic community and students. Following this review, the University is preparing to move to a semester-based teaching and operations model for the 2022/23 academic year.

In 2022/23 the academic year will be broken down into two semesters, the autumn semester and the winter semester, consisting of 22 teaching weeks in total. A semester-based approach will allow for both curriculum enhancement and extra-curricular activities, particularly those that relate to employability. Assessment Regulations are being considered as part of the project to move to a semester-based approach, and a range of regulatory and policy aspects will be considered to ensure our approach is best aligned to semesterisation, our students’ needs and sector best practice. Any changes to the Regulations will require approval from Education Committee and Academic Board.

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 academic year 2020/21 the University adjusted its delivery of support services between on campus and remote provision 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.

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 University developed an approach for teaching and student services for academic year 2021/22 that detailed how academic and service delivery would take place in the event of no restrictions, social distancing requirements or a national or local lockdown. The University provided a full, on-campus university experience from September 2021, with 95% of teaching activities taking place face to face, placing the University in the top 1% across the sector for delivering on-campus teaching.

Academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 were periods of unprecedented change. The University will continue to 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 in higher education being taught online for periods of the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic year has yet to be fully determined. Furthermore, the impact of lockdowns and periods of home schooling on students in further education who then progressed to higher education have yet to be fully understood in terms of wellbeing and academic readiness to study at a tertiary level of education. Given these factors, and the efforts made to support student progression during the pandemic the University is reviewing:

- the support it provides for students at key transitions, particularly from Level 4 to Level 5;
- the processes and support that are informed by student attendance data; and
- the provision of support services for students to ensure they are effective and responding to student's needs.

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.