

Institutional degree classification profile

1. AU operates a common set of conventions for the award of all undergraduate degrees. Examination boards are centrally managed and rigorous checks are in place to ensure that the University adheres to its regulations and conventions. Annual reports from external examiners consistently confirm that standards are in line with those elsewhere and the threshold standards in the UK. AU Examination Conventions determine progression between years of study and the algorithm for the calculation of degree classes. Regulations and quality assurance procedures are published online in the Academic Quality Handbook (AQH) <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/academic-registry/handbook/>.

2. Data

Percentage of Students by Degree Classifications					
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
I	14%	17%	18%	15%	20%
II(1)	53%	52%	49%	55%	51%
II(2)	28%	28%	29%	27%	25%
III	4%	3%	3%	2%	2%
AEGROTAT	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
PASS	1%	0%	0%	1%	2%

There has been an overall increase in First-Class and Upper-Second-Class degrees of 5.6% over the past 4 years, and which led to an equivalent fall in the other grades. The growth in firsts and uppers seconds, are believed to be accounted for through changes in three main areas:

- i. a growing number of 4-year Integrated Master’s schemes where students are required to achieve higher averages to progress;
- ii. a tightening of the progression rules, relating to restricting the ability to repeat the second year for full marks; this had an impact on the upper classifications because a small increase in the attrition rate means that there were fewer students retained to the final year who were likely to achieve lower-class awards;
- iii. an increase in the effectiveness, timeliness and thoroughness of assessment and feedback through tighter management of marking deadlines, electronic submission and electronic feedback; also aided by a reduction in the student: staff ratio seen over this period. These improvements are also considered to be key factors in contributing to AU achieving sector-leading results in this area of the National Student Satisfaction (NSS) survey.

Percentage of Degree Classifications by Subject						
		2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
STEM	I	17%	20%	21%	18%	24%
	II(1)	47%	45%	46%	50%	49%
	II(2)	28%	30%	29%	28%	23%
	III	7%	5%	4%	3%	2%
	AEGROTAT	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	PASS	1%	0%	0%	1%	2%
AHSSBL	I	12%	15%	16%	12%	17%
	II(1)	58%	57%	52%	60%	54%
	II(2)	28%	26%	29%	26%	26%
	III	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%
	AEGROTAT	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	PASS	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%

There is no clear trend over time for these subject comparisons. They do however reflect the national pattern <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/outcomes/breakdown#> where science based subjects have a higher rate of first-class and a lower rate of upper-second-class degrees than non-science subjects.

Percentage of Degree Classifications by Gender						
		2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Female	I	16%	18%	20%	16%	23%
	II(1)	56%	56%	52%	60%	54%
	II(2)	25%	24%	25%	23%	22%
	III	3%	1%	2%	1%	1%
	AEGROTAT	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	PASS	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Male	I	12%	16%	16%	13%	18%
	II(1)	51%	48%	47%	51%	49%
	II(2)	31%	32%	33%	30%	28%
	III	6%	5%	4%	3%	3%
	AEGROTAT	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	PASS	1%	0%	0%	1%	4%

A divide between female and the male students persists with female students achieving higher numbers of first-class and upper-second-class degrees in every year. However this is in line with national results published by HESA <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/outcomes> and the statistics are complicated by differential numbers of male and female students opting to take STEM subjects.

Percentage of Degree Classifications by Parental Education						
		2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Parents have a HE Qualification	I		19%	20%	16%	22%
	II(1)		54%	51%	56%	55%
	II(2)		24%	26%	25%	20%
	III		3%	3%	3%	1%
	AEGROTAT		0%	0%	0%	0%
	PASS		0%	0%	1%	2%
Parents do not have a HE Qualification	I		17%	18%	11%	22%
	II(1)		52%	51%	60%	51%
	II(2)		29%	28%	26%	24%
	III		2%	3%	2%	1%
	AEGROTAT		0%	0%	0%	0%
	PASS		0%	0%	1%	2%
Don't know / Unknown / Refused	I	14%	15%	17%	16%	18%
	II(1)	53%	49%	45%	51%	48%
	II(2)	28%	32%	34%	30%	29%
	III	4%	4%	4%	2%	2%
	AEGROTAT	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	PASS	1%	0%	0%	1%	2%

It is difficult to confirm a definite trend over time, especially as no data was collected in 2014/15, however, students with parents holding a qualification do have slightly higher grades.

Percentage of Degree Classifications by Entry Age						
		2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Below 21	I	14%	16%	16%	11%	19%
	II(1)	59%	56%	57%	61%	59%
	II(2)	26%	27%	25%	25%	22%
	III	1%	1%	2%	2%	1%
	AEGROTAT	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	PASS	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
21 and Above	I	14%	18%	20%	17%	22%
	II(1)	48%	48%	42%	51%	45%
	II(2)	30%	29%	33%	28%	27%
	III	7%	5%	4%	2%	2%
	AEGROTAT	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	PASS	1%	0%	0%	1%	4%

While mature entrants achieve a higher rate of first-class degrees, they also achieve a lower rate of good honours. This may well reflect on the variable backgrounds and academic entry standards exhibited by mature entrants. The national picture, also seen at AU, of a higher withdrawal rate for mature students makes it difficult to draw conclusions from this data.

Note in relation to AU's provision with partners, 5 students graduated with FD awards from Coleg Gwent, because numbers are so small these cannot put in a table as individuals could be identified.

Assessment and marking practices

- Assurance of assessment and marking practices is provided through engagement with external examiners and assessors, from the development of programmes through to delivery, assessment and annual monitoring. Cyclical review processes, take a longer term perspective of student performance and achievement at subject level. Annually around 70 subject level undergraduate academic external examiners are managed through a central team, and overseen by Academic Board. The final Senate degree awarding board, involves external scrutiny of AU's processes by a senior administrator from another UK university.
- External examiners are key to the assurance process. Appointees are academics experienced in assessment, curriculum design, and enhancement of the student experience. Criteria for appointment and their role are set out in the AQH and an annual briefing day is held for all new externals. A summary and overview of external examiner reports is provided annually to Senate. Aberystwyth staff also act as external examiners and panel members at other institutions, engage with staff development including as Advance HE fellows all of which contribute to a wider awareness of external reference points and subject benchmarking.
- The AQH sets out the processes and provides guidance for assessment, marking and moderation procedures, treatment of special circumstances and appeals. Independent internal observers attend departmental exam boards as well as subject external examiners and departments undertake an analysis of results as part of the exam board process. All work, including examinations, is marked against criteria outlined to students at the beginning of a module. There have been no significant changes to marking practices or assessment criteria in recent years. Annual reports on the level and types of academic appeals indicate that these are made on the grounds of special circumstances and provide further reassurance that marking and moderation processes are effective. Special circumstances are managed in each Faculty, with recommendations reviewed centrally and difficult cases referred to a central Senate special circumstances panel.

The 2019 Senate External Reviewer's report specifically commended the operation of the central special circumstances panel:

'the central review of all such cases... ensures that there is genuine parity across the University in how such claims are considered, and obviates the risk that local staff, who may know the students and be familiar with their circumstances, accept claims where the evidence is insufficient to support the claim. The level of consistency with can be assured through a central process is very welcome. From the evidence at the Board, it is evident that the Special Circumstances Panel operated a scrupulous process, and it is reassuring to note that relatively few such claims had been supported. This demonstrates the security and rigour of the independent review process.'

Academic governance

6. Faculty Academic Affairs Committees report up to Academic Board and onto Senate, which is responsible for academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement of all provision. Partnership arrangements are overseen by the Collaborative Provision Board, which also reports to Senate. The Senate Examination Board is the degree awarding board to which all departmental boards report. The Senate External Reviewer, Academic Board and Senate have all had an opportunity to contribute to and comment on this Degree Outcomes Statement. An annual QA statement provides the governing body with oversight of QA, including partnership activities. In November 2019, Academic Board received a report on 'Good Honours' rates and modules marks. The good honours rate had grown by 1.5% to 70.7% in 2018/19 and the rate of first class awards risen by 5% to 20% since the previous year. There was a high variation between departments, around 40% difference between the lowest and the highest rates and Academic Board was satisfied that the current data did not raise significant concerns although trends should be kept under review.

Classification algorithms

7. The honours classification system is determined according to a common set of conventions. The 'cascade' is a weighted average of all modules taken in part two contributing to the final degree. It allows students to retrieve earlier poor performance; focusing on and rewarding good performance while not giving undue penalties for failure; it can cope with different possible combinations of levels and modules of different credit weightings, giving a lower weighting for lower level modules. The algorithm has not changed since its inception in the 1990s apart from the weighting given to year abroad studies. Students are normally assessed immediately following completion of teaching and allowed two resit opportunities for a capped mark (40% for FHEQ level 4, 5 and 6 and 50% for level 7), reassessment is not allowed for any passed modules.

Teaching practices and learning resources

8. The University continues to invest in improvements in learning resources and to support innovation in teaching practices. A dedicated Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit supports academic staff and during the last five years, policies have been refined and embedded across the University. Recent initiatives include: mandatory lecture capture for all lectures; electronic submission of coursework with online marking and feedback; new principles of effective feedback including guidelines for exam feedback; attendance policy combined with universal attendance monitoring; deployment of learning analytics and engagement dashboard to academic staff – for use by personal tutors and also proactive interventions with low-engaging students; consistent approaches to the personal tutor system; required minimum presence (RMP) on the VLE; mandatory reading lists for all modules, refurbishment of teaching rooms and creation of social learning spaces; refurbishment of the library; Peer Observation of Teaching and sharing of effective teaching practice through annual L&T conference, Exemplary Course Award (ECA) and CPD programme; University-wide Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQs).

Identifying good practice, and actions

9. The operation of a single university wide degree algorithm is one of good practice and centrally managed processes help to deliver consistent application of rules across all academic departments. In the interests of further improving consistency, work will continue to review procedures to see where more operational activities could be automated.

Risks and challenges

10. While we are confident that no notable risks have been identified, we will maintain a close watch on the number of firsts given that the 2018/19 data showed an increase in this figure. The annual quality assurance statement to the Governing Body is the mechanism by which quality assurance processes a reported, drawing attention to activity in the previous year. In 2019 an executive summary section was added highlighting the key issues identified in the report with a traffic light system providing an indication of the level of concern. In future, the degree outcomes statement will also be included with the annual statement.