

Degree Outcome Statement 2024

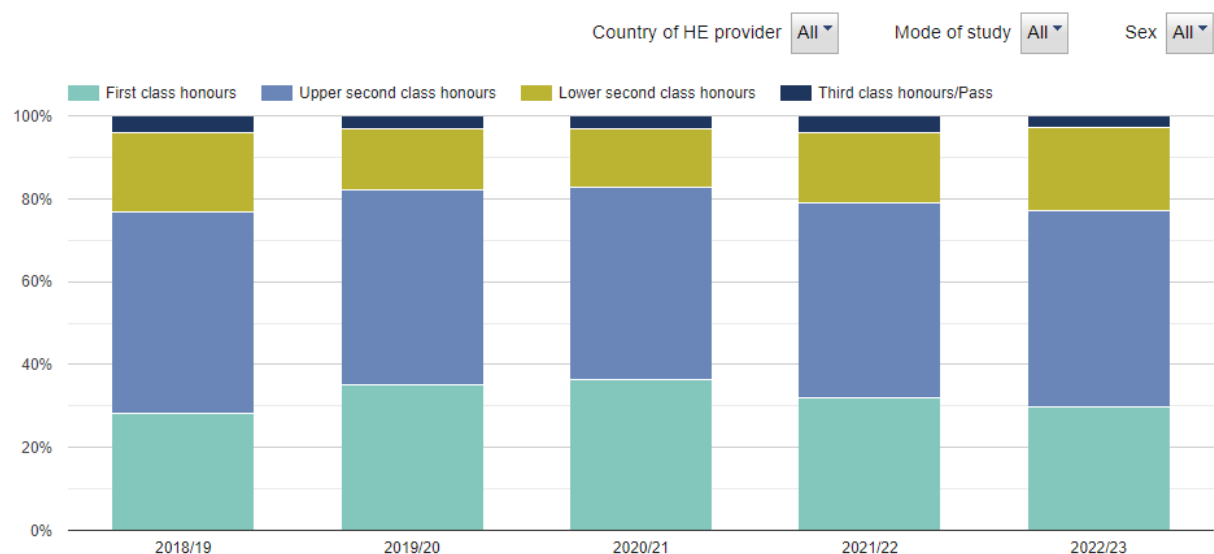
Wyn Morgan Pro Vice Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) February 2025

A. Context

The University's **Degree Outcome Statement** was first published in June 2020 and is presented here reflecting our 2024 results. The Degree Outcome Statement reflects our review of standards and the quality of our courses and awards. Since 1990 in most UK universities, there has been a long-term change in the pattern of degree outcomes, with 3rd class and 2:2 awards becoming less common and an increase in the proportion of first class degrees. In 2020 both teaching and assessment were impacted by the restrictions associated with the pandemic. In 2021 there was both a follow through of the decisions reached in 2020 and a continuation, if on a lesser scale, of the 2020 disruption. In 2023, UG awards were affected by the University and College Union Marking and Assessment Boycott. The industrial action had an impact on the timing of the release of results but not proportions in awarding class. It should be noted however that for three of the last five years exceptional circumstances have affected degree outcomes.

The figure below shows the national pattern of awards for five years up to 2023. This shows in the UK HE sector around 30% of students were awarded 1st class degrees and 48% achieved 2:1 awards.

Figure 16 - Percentage of first degree qualifiers obtaining each classification
Academic years 2018/19 to 2022/23



Source: HESA Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22 – Qualifications achieved
<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/08-08-2024/sb269-higher-education-student-statistics/qualifications>

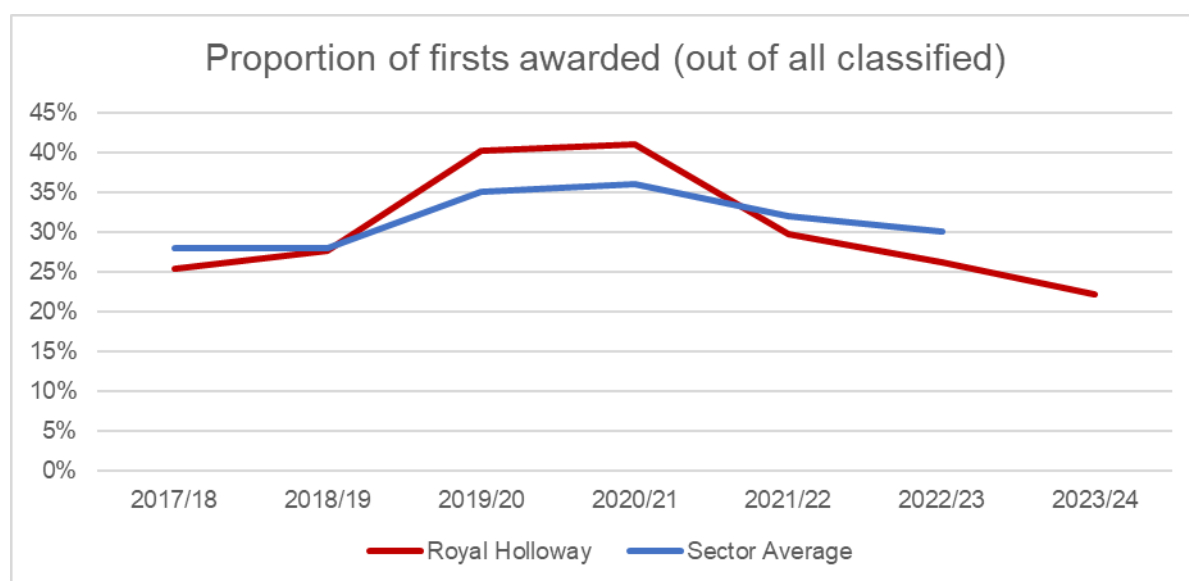
The Office for Students (OfS) is the regulator of UK Higher Education. OfS registration Condition B4 states that Universities 'must ensure that, 'relevant awards granted to students are credible at the point of being granted and when compared to those granted previously'. Condition B3 states that providers 'must deliver positive outcomes for students on its higher education courses'

B. Royal Holloway's award pattern

Royal Holloway's award pattern was very similar to national averages prior to the pandemic, as in the last five award cycles prior to 2019/20 Royal Holloway did not award more than the national average proportion of Firsts, although was very close to that mark.

However, due to our policy of no student being disadvantaged academically during the pandemic, our proportion of firsts awarded increased to 40-41% for 2019/20 and 2020/21 which exceeded the sector average proportion of firsts awarded. In 2022/23 the proportion of firsts awarded at Royal Holloway

reduced to 26%, below the sector level of 30% for the year and in line with pre-pandemic levels for the University (between the 17/18 level of 25% and the 18/19 level of 28% . Sector data are not yet available for 2023/24, so our 22% of firsts awarded cannot yet be compared to the sector average.



The tables here are the statistics we propose to include in the Degree Outcome Statement – they demonstrate a return to pre-pandemic patterns of award - and indicate the diversity of experience and inequalities in achievement between different student groups. There is a complex interrelationship between overall degree award patterns and equality of achievement. Actions targeted at ‘underachieving’ groups are likely to move students crossing into higher classes.

1. Institutional Degree Classification Profile

1.1 Overall pattern of awards for undergraduate degrees ¹

	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
First class honours	22%	26%	30%	41%	40%	28%
Upper second class honours	52%	54%	53%	48%	51%	54%
Lower second class honours	23%	18%	15%	10%	8%	17%
Third class honours/Pass	3%	2%	2%	1%	0%	2%
Average entry tariff points	135	115	132	136	141	144

1.2 Proportion of First and Upper Second Class degree by declared ethnicity

	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Overall	74%	80%	83%	89%	92%	81%
All BGM	69%	75%	81%	86%	89%	75%
Asian	68%	75%	82%	88%	90%	74%
Black	68%	70%	69%	76%	80%	69%

1.3 Proportion of First and Upper Second Class degrees by subject area ²

	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Engr, Phys. and Math. Sciences	68%	75%	75%	84%	85%	70%
Humanities	81%	90%	92%	90%	96%	91%

Law and Social Sciences	72%	75%	78%	87%	92%	75%
Life Sciences and Environment	74%	82%	86%	92%	89%	82%
Management	75%	78%	81%	91%	93%	76%
Performing and Digital Arts	89%	91%	92%	90%	92%	91%

1.4 Proportion of First and Upper Second Class degree by other characteristics

	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Female	78%	83%	86%	91%	94%	85%
Male	68%	77%	79%	87%	88%	76%
IMD Quintile 1 ³	67%	76%	71%	82%	83%	72%
Declared disability ⁴	76%	83%	86%	89%	93%	85%

1.5 Proportion of First Class degree by declared ethnicity and other characteristics

	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Overall	22%	26%	30%	41%	40%	28%
All BGM	16%	20%	24%	38%	37%	21%
Female	22%	28%	31%	41%	40%	29%
Male	22%	24%	27%	40%	41%	26%
IMD Quintile 1 ³	15%	17%	23%	32%	32%	22%
Declared disability ⁴	27%	31%	35%	43%	40%	32%

1.6 Proportion of First Class degree by subject area

	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Engr, Phys. and Math. Sciences	35%	37%	40%	49%	56%	43%
Humanities	24%	27%	30%	34%	35%	28%
Law and Social Sciences	15%	22%	23%	38%	39%	23%
Life Sciences and Environment	28%	30%	32%	46%	39%	25%
Management	17%	19%	26%	38%	38%	26%
Performing and Digital Arts	33%	33%	39%	48%	43%	33%

All summaries have been calculated based on HESA core output files for each individual reporting cycle.

Awarding patterns in 2024 are closer to 2019 and 2018 than in either 2021 or 2020 and represent a further step away from the exceptional patterns that arose during the pandemic.

¹ Percentages are for all students awarded a First degree in the year and exclude students who have failed to complete.

² Disciplinary divisions correspond to Royal Holloway's School divisions.

³ English Indices of Multiple Deprivation, highest (*i.e.* most deprived) quintile. This data uses English domiciled students only.

⁴ Registered disability proportion would not consider records where disability information is not provided in the HESA core file.

2. Assessment and Marking Practices

Marking practices at Royal Holloway are rigorous, systematic and robust. All marking is anonymous, where practicable. There is compulsory double-marking or moderation of marking, following clear guidelines. While Royal Holloway has sought to diversify forms of assessment, unseen timed examinations remain a core element of our assessment regimes comprising around 25% of summative marks from unseen timed examination.

All courses at Royal Holloway are assessed in relation to detailed marking criteria that reference benchmarking statements and other sector reference points, including PSRB requirements. Academic staff are given guidance and training in the use of these criteria. There are specific, discipline-appropriate criteria for different forms of assessment. These criteria are publicised and explained to students, and one aspect of degree improvement over the past decade is that students have much greater awareness of the requirements of assessment. Criteria-based assessment is an integral mandatory element of the required training for new academic staff that leads to Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). HEA accredited Continuing Professional Development for established academic staff also requires detailed reflection on assessment/marketing/feedback and quality assurance practices, and Advance HE data report that the percentage of academic staff with any type of Fellowship at RHUL rose (from 55.2% in 2021/22) to 62.3% in 2023/24 [*Note: Advance HE have changed methodology from previous reporting, so 2021/22 figure is not comparable with last year's statement*].

Royal Holloway implements and retains a system of stepped marking (with three assessment points in each class) to bring greater consistency to marking, and to ensure parity in marking practices for all undergraduate students. The system was also introduced in response to sustained and consistent feedback from External Examiners that the full range of marks should be used, and that in particular, examples of outstanding undergraduate work should be awarded marks in the 80%+ and very exceptionally in the 90%+ range.

Assessment at Royal Holloway is quality assured through an extensive system of external expertise, complying fully with expectations and practices set out in the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Advice and Guidance on External Expertise* published in November 2018. The system of external expertise has developed in accordance with previous Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Quality Codes. In 2023-24 the undergraduate degrees were reviewed by 73 External Examiners, all subject experts from established UK universities, appointed in line with UKSCQA External Examining Principles published by the QAA. External Examiners provide signed assurance that standards of award are in line with those at comparable institutions, and since 2018-19 have been explicitly asked to give assurance that standards are also consistent between different cohorts at Royal Holloway (External Examiners typically serve for 3 years). External Examiners routinely inspect samples of marked work, and comment on appropriate standards for individual modules as well as overall course progression and outcomes. External expertise is also central to course development, validation, and revalidation. In all these exercises reference is made, where applicable, to relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Standards. Many of Royal Holloway's undergraduate degrees also undergo regular reaccreditation by relevant Professional, Statutory and Regulatory bodies.

Royal Holloway is taking steps to strengthen external scrutiny of award standards. The University is organised into 6 Schools each comprising around 4 or 5 cognate disciplines. As well as retaining subject specialist External Examiners, from 2019-20 the University appointed a Chief External Examiner for each School, whose role includes the calibration of awards against award pattern in other universities, and assurance of consistency of standards over time. These are experienced External Examiners. From 2020 onwards the University has also appointed a Principal External Examiner, who serves as an external member of the University's Assessment and Academic Regulations Sub Committee and whose annual report is scrutinised by Council. The Principal External Examiner is responsible for assurance of overall institutional standards and assessment regimes.

In 2020, the pandemic disrupted operations, but all assessments were delivered within a quality assured and consistent framework that minimised the impact of disruption on students and maintained academic

rigour. We adapted to new models of assessment, using a range of technological adaptations to ensure assessment despite the restrictions in place. The University has reviewed what worked in this change and continued the use of much of the innovation in assessment since. Our expectation is to continue to develop the learning and innovation in assessment methods. In 2023, the experience of assessment results was affected by the marking and assessment boycott, but the formats and delivery of assessments exercises to students was not changed. The University has undertaken a university-wide Assessment Futures Project in the academic year 2023/24 which resulted in a review of assessment for all taught provision. The focus of the project was to ensure assessment was more closely linked to course learning outcomes, supported skills development through authentic assessment methods and reduced the assessment load for students.

3. Academic Governance

The Academic Board has overall responsibility for academic standards at Royal Holloway. Its functions in this respect work primarily through the system of Examination Boards, and its Assessment and Academic Regulations Sub Committee (AARSC). The University operates a system of Departmental Assessment Boards (DABs), which review the marking and standards of work on individual modules, and School Progression and Awards Boards (SPABs), which review module marks and make awards, progression and extenuating circumstances decisions for our courses. Both DABs and SPABs are required to review standards in relation to the wider sector and previous cohorts, and the parity of standards between on-campus provision and courses delivered through partnership arrangements. External Examiners attend and sign off module standards at DABs, while Chief External Examiners sign-off on award standards at SPABs. All awards delivered through partnership arrangements are subject to Royal Holloway's marking and moderation policies, with overall oversight of standards monitored by Chief External Examiners. AARSC previously the Assessment, Quality and Standards Committee has institutional oversight of the system of Boards and Awards. The Principal External Examiner attends the AARSC for meetings reviewing student outcomes.

Detailed scrutiny of quality, standards, regulations and awards is undertaken by AARSC. AARSC reviews patterns of award on Royal Holloway courses, particularly monitoring changes in award pattern and marked differences from sector norms. AARSC reviews Royal Holloway award patterns using statistical analyses that analyse award patterns and entry tariffs across the sector and at similar institutions. The committee also reviews comments on standards from External Examiners. In recent years, the Assessment, Quality and Standards Committee (the predecessor committee of AARSC) has asked Departments to review and modify forms of assessment, assessment weighting and assessment criteria.

Council, the University's Governing Body provides independent scrutiny of academic quality assurance at Royal Holloway, particularly through the work of the Students, Education and Research Committee (SER). Each year the University's Academic Quality and Policy Office (AQPO), produces an Annual Quality and Standards Report, which includes detailed statistical overview of progression and awards, and a record of External Examining activity and reports. This is approved by the Academic Board and is scrutinised by SER. SER may audit procedures and cross-examine University officers. Subject to acceptable standards, SER recommends that Council signs-off the Annual Quality and Standards Report. This in the past was required by HEFCE and has been maintained as a way of indicating Council's confidence that Royal Holloway is meeting the Office for Students' ongoing conditions of registration.

4. Classification Algorithm

Royal Holloway has a single degree algorithm that applies across all undergraduate disciplines and degree courses, with appropriate and consistent variations for four-year integrated Masters MSci and MEng degrees, transfer students, and courses with a year abroad and/or a year in industry.

For three year (or equivalent) undergraduate degrees (BA, BMus, BSc, BSc (Econ), LLB.):

- First Stage (Year One for a full-time student) is on a pass-fail basis and does not contribute to the final year classification.
- The Final Average is the average of performance at Stage Two and Stage Three (Years Two and Three for full time students completing in three years), with Stage Three double-weighted, calculated to one decimal place:

$$\text{Final Average} = \frac{\text{2nd Stage Average} + 2 \times (\text{final Stage Average})}{3}$$

- The Final Average is used for classification, so students achieving 70.0% or better are awarded First Class honours; 60.0% to 69.9% are awarded Upper Second Class honours; 50.0% to 59.9% are awarded Lower Second Class honours; and 40.0% to 49.9% Third Class honours.
- Students within 2% of a class boundary who have achieved at least 60 credits in the final stage (half of the available 120 credits in the final stage) in the higher class are automatically raised. So, for example, a student with a Final Average of 58.8%, but with four 15 credits modules graded above 60% (half the year) would be awarded an Upper Second Class degree.

The algorithm is simple and consistent across all disciplines in the University. It achieves fair outcomes for all students by avoiding disciplinary variations and 'local practice', and potentially unfair discretionary decisions. The assessment of Stage One on a pass-fail basis helps us to support all students to benefit from and succeed in higher education. It recognises the importance and potential difficulties of transition to university, and the development of learning skills among a diversity of students. Our algorithm recognises the progressive nature of university learning by double-weighting the final stage of degrees.

The core algorithm remains unchanged since 2007. There have been changes to the zone for raising. This was set at 2% in 2011, but with discretionary powers to raise given to Examination Boards. To ensure equal treatment for all students, this was changed to automatic raising subject to the 'final average must be within 2.0% of one of the classification boundaries and the marks for at least 60 credits counting in the final stage must be above the relevant classification boundary' rule from 2014-15 onwards.

Royal Holloway has tight rules and limits on resits. In general terms resits are available to allow students to progress or graduate by resitting failed modules. Except where there are approved extenuating circumstances, resit marks are capped at 40% (50% for final year MSci and MEng courses), and do not have a material effect on classification outcomes. Students without approved extenuating circumstances are limited to two attempts at a module.

Emergency regulations were applied in the Spring of 2023 to mitigate the impact of the marking and assessment boycott and to ensure student outcomes were protected. These included a relaxation on the number of condoned fails permitted for progression, processes to achieve a final module mark where assessment component marks were missing so long as the assessment board were satisfied learning outcomes had been demonstrably met, and a broader scope – broader than in response to specific extenuating circumstances – for permitting modules to be *Allowed* whereby the module was passed because learning outcomes had been met but it was passed without a mark. These emergency regulations were time limited for the duration of the marking and assessment boycott and have not been continued after the ending of the industrial action. The University reverted to standard regulations for 2023/24.

Previously, other emergency regulations were in force in 2019/20 and 2020/21 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. These regulations permitted in 2019/20 assessment changes to enable assessment in light of the stay at home restrictions in place at different times, a 'Safety Net' (or 'no detriment') baseline classification below which their final class could not fall, based on all counting summative assessments completed before March 2020 and the final year mark entered into the classification algorithm was based on the average of the best 90 of 120 credits. The regulatory response to the pandemic was adjusted in

2020/21 with the introduction of a Fairness and Assurance Policy which relaxed on the number of condoned fails permitted for progression, less prescriptive requirements in support of claims for extenuating circumstances and extensions, extended resit opportunities for failed assessments and continued the 'Safety Net' calculation for all 2021/22 Second and Third Year (non-finalist) students to be undertaken at the point of award. For the academic year 2021/22 the University reverted to standard academic regulations, although the University retained one of the mitigations put in place in response to the pandemic namely that students are now permitted to graduate with marks in the condonable fail range for 90 credits of modules, split evenly over the three years of study.

5. Teaching Practices and Learning Resources

Several enhancements to teaching practices, learning resources and course curriculum and assessment design have contributed to improved student performance in the past 3 years:

- i. Royal Holloway has made significant investment in Library and digital provision of learning resources, most notably with the opening of a major new Library building in 2017 at a cost of £57m. There is measurable evidence of greater student use of physical and digital resources, and the creation of a central learning space on the campus has positively impacted student engagement and learning culture.
- ii. As noted above, Royal Holloway makes greater use of marking criteria, and there is greater transparency of marking criteria, particularly through the use of rubrics and criteria-based feedback. This is to ensure our students have a clear sense of what is required to achieve higher classification marks.
- iii. There has been review of assessment strategies. Royal Holloway has diversified its assessment but retains a substantial proportion of unseen examination. It has also addressed bunching of assessment deadlines for coursework, and in some disciplines has decreased the volume of coursework assessment. This involved systematic comparison with other institutions and was often instigated by External Examiners' comments on assessment regimes. Assessment at Royal Holloway has become better organised and managed, giving students greater opportunity to fulfil their potential.
- iv. Royal Holloway has enhanced support for students with increased focus on study skills. This is embedded systematically within degree courses, with a strong focus on the transition to university. This is also supported by a University-wide Centre for the Development of Academic Skills (CeDAS), which has provided extensive structured support in academic writing, and in key numeracy skills underpinning degrees in sciences and social sciences. This additional support for study skills has helped students across the range of award outcomes but is likely to have been particularly significant at the 2:2/2:1 borderline.
- v. Royal Holloway has improved the professional development of new and established academic staff, notably through Higher Education Academy-accredited CPD that requires detailed reflection on assessment/markings/feedback and quality assurance approaches. The proportion of academic staff with HEA fellowship increased from 55.2% in 2021-22 to 62.3% in 2023-24. *[Note: Advance HE have changed methodology from previous reporting, so 2021/22 figure is not comparable with last year's statement].*
- vi. The details of degree results above indicate attainment gaps for some groups of students. In line with our Access and Participation Plan, and our commitment to deliver successful outcomes for all student groups, Royal Holloway will support these student groups to achieve higher degree classifications, and will continue to target support, resources and curriculum changes at achieving those objectives.

6. Identifying Good Practice and actions, and Further Review

Items i-vi in the previous section are identified as examples of good practice.

In addition, the University has adopted a data-led approach to the scrutiny of standards through the work of AARSC. This involves annual calibration of award patterns against the sector and similar institutions, with analysis of entry tariff patterns. This takes place discipline by discipline.

Royal Holloway supports initiatives to maintain the standards and value of awards.

- i. Royal Holloway has a strong, embedded and integrated approach to External Examining and academic governance. The introduction and embedding of both School-level Chief Examiners and Independent Principal External Examiner with responsibility for assurance of overall institutional standards and assessment regimes is effective and ensures a consistent, rigorous and informed approach to award and classification. Their annual report will become part of the scrutiny of quality assurance and standards by Council.
- ii. Royal Holloway will strengthen data, guidance and training for External Examiners. Data packs for External Examiners are available at exam boards, and the University is providing more detailed data about past student performance on individual modules.
- iii. Royal Holloway's core algorithm and resit policy is in line with sector-norms and expectations. We are strongly committed to retaining a single, simple system to ensure fairness between students. We welcome wide sector level review of algorithms and zones for raising to achieve more consistency. A review of our taught course regulations took place in 2023/24, with a new set of Academic Taught Regulations published in 2024/25.
- iv. The University uses a diverse range of assessment methods and is committed to greater use of technology in assessment. With the rise of Generative AI the University is alive to both the opportunities and the potential threats to academic integrity presented by the development of Generative AI. The University has established Working Groups in this area.
- v. In common with all of the UK HE sector, assessment was impacted by the pandemic but robust assessment was delivered smoothly and with the minimum of disruption. Further, we are applying the learning and experience from delivering assessment during the pandemic to assessment in current and future years.
- vi. Implementation of the Assessment Futures Initiative. This is a systematic, University-wide review of all UG and PGT taught provision with a focus on enhancing and implementing more authentic assessment with reduced assessment load, and greater constructive alignment to all course learning outcomes. Changes to assessments will come into effect from 2024/25.