

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER DEGREE OUTCOMES STATEMENT 2021: SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT

Report into the 2019/20 No Detriment Policy implemented at the University of Exeter in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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I. Introduction

In March 2020, along with the whole of the Higher Education (HE) sector in Europe, the University of Exeter was faced with the challenge of how to achieve two aims:

- (1) To ensure the quality and standards of its degrees; and
- (2) To protect students' interests in truly exceptional circumstances.

In order to address these aims, the University committed to supporting students to complete their learning journey within the academic year. Given the amount of learning that takes place in preparation for, and completion of, summer examinations and assessments, it was recognised that the most effective way to support completion of student learning journeys and achievement of intended learning outcomes was to change the diet of assessment as little as possible. This did, however, require moving all assessments online in a very short period of time. Furthermore, it was considered that retention of the normality of summer assessments could be of significant value to student wellbeing during a time of unprecedented uncertainty and potential loss of direction. Nevertheless, the University also recognised the jeopardy that this put students in with respect to their academic outcomes and the risk that the students' focus on this jeopardy could reduce their potential to achieve intended learning outcomes and put their mental health at risk.

The University also recognised the significant variation in the living and studying environments and the personal circumstances in which students would prepare for and undertake their summer examinations and assessments. Accordingly, alongside the decision to retain a full diet of assessment for all cohorts in the summer of 2020, the University introduced its **No Detriment Policy** (NDP). It is important to emphasise that the development and introduction of the NDP was intimately linked and co-dependent on the University's approach to the summer assessments. At all times special consideration and individual attention was given to students who faced exceptional circumstances and it was recognised that in some cases, the only option for a student would be to defer their examinations and/or assessments. Nevertheless, every effort was made to support all students to progress and to succeed through the provision of **Success for All Funding** and enhanced digital and wellbeing support.

In coming to the paired decision regarding assessment and no detriment, steps were taken to explain to all students the factors that were taken into account and the principles that underpinned the NDP.

“In working out how to organise the summer examination and assessment period this year, there are several factors we have considered:

- I. How to enable and encourage you to continue your studies until the end of the academic year;*
- II. How to enable and encourage you to complete your assessments as planned wherever possible, so that you are well prepared for the next stage of your studies or, in the case of final-year undergraduates and Masters students, so that you can receive your degree on time;*
- III. How to give you a chance to demonstrate what you have learned, bearing in mind that many students improve their overall mark as a result of summer examinations and assessments;*
- IV. How to ensure fairness for all students, especially in relation to Individual Learning Plans (ILPs);*
- V. Perhaps most importantly, how to ensure that your work is assessed in a way which takes account of the extraordinary and challenging conditions in which you will be preparing for and taking these assessments; and*
- VI. At the same time, we recognise that not everyone will be in a position to take assessments this summer, and we want to be as flexible as we can.”*

Professor Tim Quine, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Education) (part of a [communication to students dated 25/3/20](#))

This type of policy was subsequently replicated across the HE sector but as yet there has neither been in depth analysis of whether the policies achieved what they set out to achieve, nor what could, or should, be learned from the experience of implementing them. It is vital, however, that individual institutions and the sector as a whole reflect on the impact of a policy developed *in extremis* in order to ensure that lessons can be learned for the future to both enhance HE students’ academic experience and ensure that, individually and collectively, the sector is prepared in the event that it faces such exceptional circumstances again.

As a starting point for such an academic and professional discourse, this report lays out the details of the University’s NDP, together with the factors taken into consideration at the time, and then presents an analysis of the impact of the NDP on degree outcomes for different demographic groups of students. The report does not seek to explain those differences but simply presents a series of challenging questions for deeper consideration. Further, more detailed analysis and consideration of the longer term impact on both overall degree outcomes and awarding gaps will follow in a full research paper.

2. The Policy

The aim of the NDP was to ensure the fairness and integrity of the Exeter Award, as well as to support students through a difficult situation in a way that allowed them to progress or be awarded and, as far as was possible, to ensure equity in treatment of academic awards despite the clear inequalities in the impact of COVID-19 on different demographic groups.

The NDP was based on the calculation of a benchmark for all taught undergraduate and postgraduate students using credit-weighted grades achieved up to and including 15th March 2020. This benchmark acted as a 'safety net' and ensured that students received an award or stage average that accurately reflected their academic attainment during their time on their course, unimpaired by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The key elements of the policy were as follows:

- The benchmark was based on actual achievement from the current academic stage as far as possible;
- In order for the benchmark to be reliable, it was based on a mean mark derived from sufficient credit (equivalent to at least half the total credits of the relevant stage);
- If insufficient credit had been accumulated in the current stage, achievement in the previous University of Exeter-based stage was included within the calculation;
- If there was no prior University of Exeter-based stage, then the benchmark was provisional until, in the case of Postgraduate Taught students (PGTs), sufficient credit had been accumulated to confirm the benchmark;
- The benchmark was calculated and applied after all other normal assessment processes had been completed (e.g. condonement, mitigation, scaling, and late penalties); and
- For students who passed the current stage during 2019/20 academic year, the credit-weighted mean for all assessments contributing to the stage were compared to the benchmark, and the higher of these two results was used as their overall result for the stage.

This was an automatic process; students did not need to apply for consideration under the NDP.

3. The Analysis

The data used in this analysis constituted all students graduating from undergraduate programmes in 2019/20, excluding the Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (BMBS), which is an unclassified award and subject to General Medical Council (GMC) regulations. Given the specific objective of the policy to attempt to protect academic outcomes amongst students who might have been more adversely impacted by COVID-19, the effect of the policy for the following demographic groups was analysed:

- Fee status (Home or International)
- Gender
- Age
- Eligibility for the Access to Exeter Bursary
- Ethnicity
- Household income
- POLAR 4 Quintiles
- Broad subject area (Academic College)

For each demographic group the following questions were investigated:

1. How many students received an uplift as a result of the NDP?
2. How many students received a NDP uplift of five percentage points or more?
3. How many students received a NDP uplift that increased their degree classification?
4. What was the average NDP uplift received?

A Biased Coin Model was used to model the probability that a single student benefitted from the NDP. The overall University-wide probability of a student benefitting from the NDP was then used to predict how many students in a given demographic group would be expected to benefit from the NDP. The Biased Coin Model then compares this number to the actual number of students benefitting from the NDP in that demographic group and calculates the probability that the student outcomes observed were down to chance. A low probability that the outcome was down to chance indicates that the policy had a statistically significant impact upon the outcomes for that demographic group, with the significance level set at 95%.

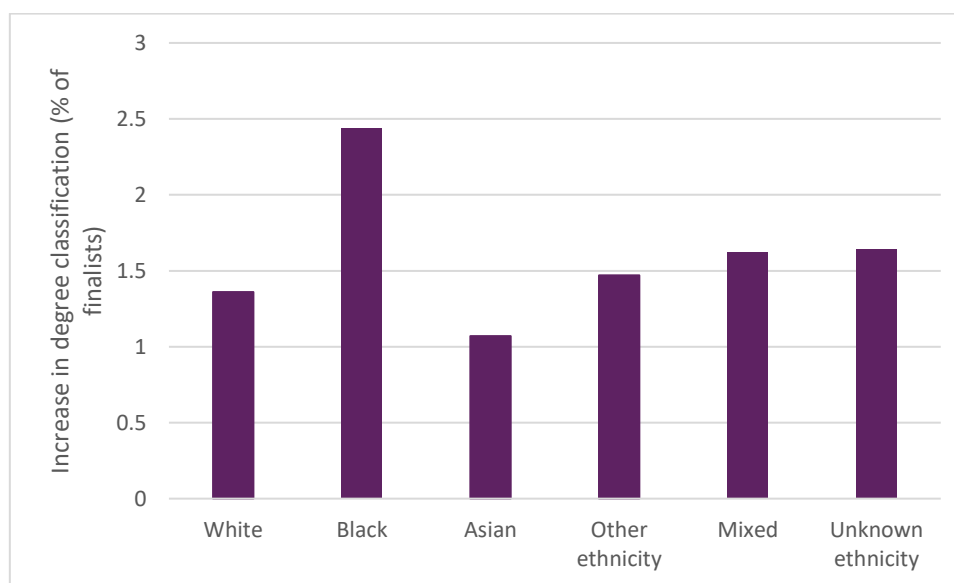
4. The Results

In total 1762 students received an uplift in their final degree mark as a result of the NDP. This was 36.3% of finalists. Of those students, 168 received an uplift of 5% or more (3.5%) and just 67 received a change in degree classification as a result (1.4%). The average uplift was 1.3%.

Analysis of the impact of fee status shows that home students were more likely to use the NDP than international students (37.5% of home students, compared to 36.3% of all students) but, with a probability of it being down to chance of 5.2%, this may not be significant. International fee paying students were significantly less likely to use the NDP (29.0% of international fee paying students, compared to 36.3% of all students, with a probability of this being down to chance of just 0.35%). There was no significant difference in the chance of students receiving an increased degree classification in these two groups.

When considering ethnicity, black students were more likely to receive an increase in degree classification (2.4% of black students compared to 1.3% of other students) despite no black students receiving an uplift of 5% or more. However, this was not significant (with the probability of this being down to chance at 31.2%) due to the small number of finalists in this demographic (82).

Figure 1: Percentage of finalists seeing an increase in degree classification for by ethnicity



No significant differences were observed between groups when considering age or gender.

A number of surrogate measures or potential difference in experience were considered:

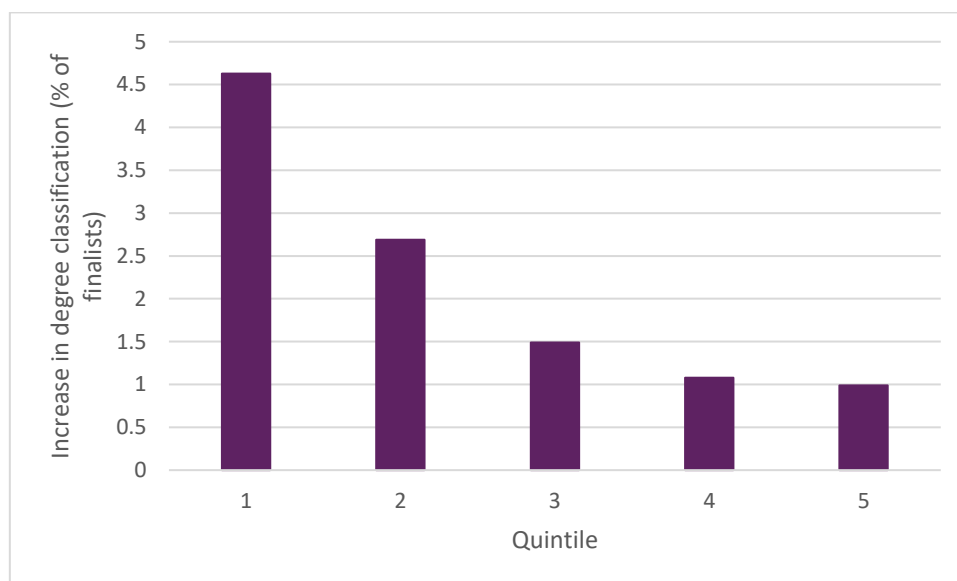
When considering household income, whilst there were significant differences in the chance of a student receiving a mark increase as a result of the NDP, there were no clear trends. Students in the £25k-42k bracket were more likely to benefit from an increase in mark, with a probability that this was down to chance of 0.67%, but there were no significant differences between other groups. There were also no significant differences in the chance of students seeing an increase in degree classification.

An alternative analysis considered recipients of the [Access to Exeter Bursary](#) which is awarded to students with a household income of less than £25k per year, however, there also were no differences between students eligible for bursaries and those ineligible.

The most interesting and significant impacts of the NDP were seen when considering the Participation of Local Areas ([POLAR 4](#)) metric , which is a measure of the proportion of young people from a local area progressing to HE. Quintile 1 students come from areas with the lowest historical participation in HE, whereas Quintile 5 students come from areas with the highest historical participation in HE. Whilst students in the Quintile 1 were the second least likely to benefit from a mark uplift (Quintile 5 being least likely), they were most likely to receive an uplift of 5% or more and most likely to receive an uplift in degree classification.

Quintile 1 and 2 students were significantly more likely to receive a degree classification uplift than students in other quintiles, with 4.6% and 2.7% of students respectively receiving an uplift compared to just 1.4% overall, and with probabilities of this being down to chance of 0.03% and 1.9% respectively. Students in Quintile 5 were least likely to receive an uplift of 5% or more and least likely to receive an uplift in degree classification. Accordingly, students in Quintile 1 were three times as likely to receive a degree classification uplift as a result of the NDP compared to the average student, and students in Quintile 2 were twice as likely to see an increase in classification.

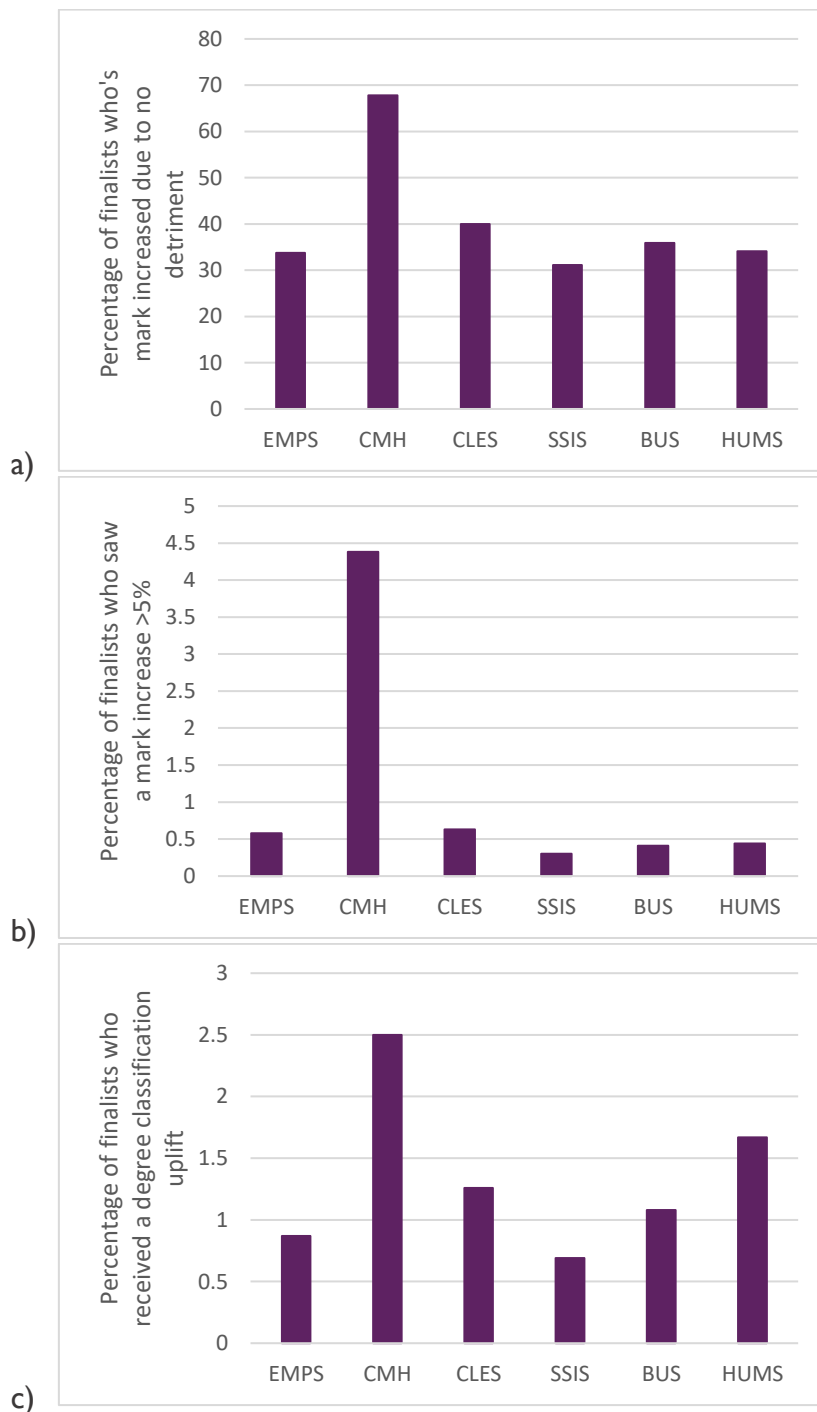
Figure 2: Percentage of finalists seeing an increase in degree classification for POLAR 4 quintiles 1-5



A comparison was done between [University of Exeter Academic Colleges](#) and it was observed that students from the College of Medicine and Health (CMH) were far more likely to benefit from the NDP than students from other Colleges. This excluded the BMBS qualification where NDP was not applied as it is an unclassified award and subject to GMC regulations. Overall, 67.8% of CMH students received a mark uplift compared to 36.2% of other students. These students also received larger uplifts, 2.2 percentage points (pp) compared to 1.3pp elsewhere, and were more likely to receive an increase in degree classification. This College had the smallest number of students eligible for the NDP, 160 out of 4865 finalists, but the differences between CMH students and those of other colleges were so large that the significance calculations for Colleges were modelled excluding CMH, as this would have skewed the data considerably.

When considering the other five Colleges, students from the College of Life and Environmental Sciences were most likely to see an increase in mark (40.0% compared to 36.2%) and students from the College of Social Sciences and International Studies were least likely to receive an increase in mark (31.1%). Students from the College of Humanities received the smallest average uplift but were most likely to see their degree classification increase. Overall, students from Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) Colleges received larger average uplifts than students from the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) College.

Figure 3: Comparisons between colleges a) percentage of finalists who saw an increase in mark, b) percentage of finalists who saw a >5% increase in mark and c) percentage of finalists who saw an increase in degree classification



Comparing these data to the overall degree classifications and outcomes picture gives rise to some interesting questions.

The percentage of 'good honours degrees' (1st and 2:1) increased by 4%, from 87% in 2018/19 to 91% in 2019/20. It is clearly not the case, however, that the NDP was solely responsible for the increase in 'good honours degrees' since only 1.4% saw an increase in degree classification as a result of the NDP. This implies that factors other than those associated with the NDP were more significant. This somewhat contradicts assumptions made elsewhere. A report published by Universities UK (UUK) and Guild HE on Degree Classifications in 2019/20¹ indicates that these observations reflect degree outcomes across the HE sector under No Detriment and other 'safety net' policies, stating that:

- *“Across the UK, there was a six-percentage point increase of upper awards (1st class and 2:1 awards) in 2019–20. The proportion of 1st class awards rose to over a third (35%)”;*

Reductions were observed in the awarding gaps within the University consistent with trends seen across the sector. For example, at the University, the gap between mature and young students closed by 6pp from 10pp in 2018/19 to 4pp in 2019/20 but no differences in the use of the NDP were observed between these demographic groups. The UUK and Guild HE report also stated that:

- *“Analysis shows that despite the disruption, 2019–20 saw a narrowing of attainment [awarding] gaps for the graduating cohort by deprivation, gender, disability and ethnicity.”*

The gap between Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and White students closed by 2pp from 14pp in 2018/19 to 12pp in 2019/20 and this does somewhat reflect the analysis of the impact of the NDP, which shows black students were 1% more likely than other demographic groups to receive an increase in degree classification, although the small numbers make this difficult to conclude definitively.

It could be speculated that the increase in 'good honours degrees' and the closing of awarding gaps, relates to changes in assessment mode and setting, with more open book and coursework style assessments, and fewer high stakes, closed book and time limited assessments. These explanations need further investigation, however.

In order to further test whether the changes in outcomes could be unrelated to the application of the NDP or simply be a product of chance variations in outcomes, this scenario was also modelled. The identified 1.3% uplift for 36.3% of finalists was applied randomly across groups and the patterns of degree classification change by demographic groups were observed. In all demographic analyses, apart from POLAR 4, any variation between groups in the random allocation model mirrored that seen in the actual data. In the random allocation modelling of POLAR 4 data, the opposite pattern was seen in comparison to the actual data; namely that there was an increase in degree classifications for students from Quintiles 3, 4 and 5 more often than for students in Quintiles 1 and 2. This is further clear evidence that the NDP itself did have a significant positive impact on students from the lowest participation neighbourhoods.

5. Conclusions

There are many questions arising from this dataset and the University and the HE sector as a whole should not shy away from asking them. In particular, those questions which feed into on-going work to understand and address awarding gaps. These are not easy to answer and further interrogation of this and other data is required.

What is clear is that the NDP did not represent a relaxation of academic standards causing significant increases in the proportion of 'good honours degrees'. The vast majority of students obtained a degree classification from marks which included a significant number of examinations sat at the height of the national lockdown. NDP acted, as intended, as a 'safety net' for a small number of students who were unable to perform at a level consistent with their previous attainment.

The NDP was also not solely responsible for the observed reduction in awarding gaps. It is more likely that other changes to the type and mode of assessment had a greater impact on student attainment and thus their degree classification. In addition, students reported anecdotally lower levels of stress as examinations moved to open book and there was a reduction in time limited assessments. A policy introduced *in extremis* has, therefore, shed important light on the potential to create more equitable approaches to the examination and assessment of academic attainment.

It is also worth noting that one of the biggest impacts of the NDP may have been to give students more confidence going into examinations and to lower their stress levels, allowing students to perform to the best of their ability, whilst knowing they had the benchmark to fall back on if needed.

“As a union we have been in conversation with the University this entire academic year about what a compassionate campus looks like both in practice and policy. I can say that the response from the University to the stress and trauma our students are currently facing goes above and beyond this. I work on the frontline with students, many of whom are from marginalised backgrounds, and I witness how the No Detriment policy has given students the time, space, and reassurance to first and foremost prioritise their own health and safety, whilst also working to the best of their ability, and achieving a degree classification that is indicative of their true ability.”

Sunday Blake, VP Postgraduate (2019/20) and President (2020/21), University of Exeter Students' Guild