Queen Mary
University of London

Senate

Paper Title	**President and Principal's Report to Senate**
Outcome requested	Senate is asked to note and discuss the attached report, finalised on 15 February.
Points for Senate members to note and further information	The President and Principal will provide a written report to each Senate meeting. This provides an opportunity to highlight key issues and developments to Senate members, for information and also discussion at the meeting as appropriate. This report covers the following: • Pensions and pay. • Non-permanent contracts. • Updates on senior personnel. • Developments in the external HE policy environment. • Student recruitment. • Development of new University strategy.
Questions for Senate to consider	N/A
Regulatory/statutory reference points	N/A
Strategy and risk	Relates to all aspects of QMUL strategy and all sections of the Risk Register.
Reporting/ consideration route for the paper	For Senate only
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President and Principal's Report
Senate Meeting – 7 March 2019

This report (finalised on 20 February) provides Senate with updates on a range of key issues.

1   Staff Matters

1.1   USS Pension Scheme

As noted at the last Senate meeting, Queen Mary submitted our employer response to UUK's consultation on the report by the Joint Expert Panel (JEP), which can be accessed on Connected via the following link:
http://connected.qmul.ac.uk/news/items/update-on-universities-superannuation-scheme-uss-on-monday-29-october.html

Queen Mary was supportive of the JEP recommendations as a platform for achieving a resolution to the pension issue, and this position was mirrored by other institutions across the sector. Based on the JEP's recommendations, there would need to be a 3.2% increase in contributions in order to maintain current benefits. If a 65/35 cost sharing principle is applied (in line with the current USS approach) then the employer contributions would rise to 20.1% and member contributions to 9.1%. We have confirmed that we are willing to meet this new level of contribution, which is an increase of 2.1% compared to current levels. As agreed by Council this increase in contributions must come from increased revenue and cost controls. UCU, representing all members (including those who are not members of the Union) has also confirmed its support for the JEP outcomes.

USS has in response launched a consultation process around a new 2018 valuation for the pension scheme, which would in theory allow it to consider the JEP recommendations, subject to UUK and UCU agreeing a specific proposal on benefits and contributions. USS has stated its view that the JEP report recommendations will result in a higher level of risk, which must be underwritten by the employers via contingent contributions (trigger contributions). These are increased contributions which can be enforced without consultation. We have been clear through our responses that we do not support the principle of trigger contributions, but we wait to see the proposals put forward by USS and UUK. Without the acceptance of trigger contributions, the USS Trustee have indicated that they cannot accept the JEP recommendations.

Senate are reminded that in the absence of any formally agreed alternative proposal at this stage, USS are moving ahead with the implementation of the Clause 76.4 mechanism, which enforces a 6.9% increase in contributions for employers and a 3.7% increase from members. These increases will be introduced on a phased basis between April 2019 and April 2020. We will continue to look at increasing revenue whilst controlling costs to meet these enforced costs from USS.

1.2   Pay

UCU is re-balloting members on the prospect on industrial action, following the pay negotiations in 2018. Voting is due to close on 22 February. The ballot is focussed on issues connected to overall pay levels (with a request for a 7.5% pay increase), gender pay differentials, contracts and workload. The ballot will take place on an aggregate basis (i.e. results for all institutions counted together).

1.3   Non-Permanent Contracts
We have been looking closely at this issue, initially considering the position for academic colleagues. I sent an all-staff email to update colleagues on this work and to provide some insights from the analysis that is underway into non-permanent contracts at the University.

A specific review within HSS has identified that approximately 40% of those on non-permanent contracts within the Faculty are PhD students, while around 30% are specialist practitioners/teachers who are bringing specific and niche expertise to our teaching activity. Providing opportunities for our PhD students to gain teaching experience while also being properly rewarded for their contributions is particularly important.

Most other cases of non-permanent contracts in the Faculty are attributable to cover for staff absences (e.g. sabbatical leave or sickness), or externally funded research projects. However, a small group of colleagues have been identified where the justification for recurrent fixed-term contracts is not immediately apparent and these are being reviewed and addressed.

Although most cases of fixed-term academic contracts relate to our activity as a leading research and teaching institution, we will need to keep this issue under ongoing review to ensure that all colleagues are provided with the right contractual arrangements. We will therefore continue to review contract types and our approach to fixed-term contracts, across all three Faculties and Professional Services.

Data and analysis on this issue will be placed on Connected in due course so that all colleagues can see the position.

2   Updates on Senior Personnel

2.1   Vice-Principal (Research)
I sent an all-staff email to update colleagues on the position regarding this key role. Unfortunately we were unable to make an appointment following a search process towards the end of 2018. We are now in the process of initiating another international search and will move to appoint a suitably high calibre candidate as quickly as possible.

In the interim, our activity will continue to be led by the relevant Deputy Vice-Principals and Faculty Deans for Research. The Director of Research Services, Dr Sharon Ellis, will represent research interests on QMSE during this interim period and will work with the Head of Research Strategy and Policy, Dr Emma Hare, to drive cross-faculty initiatives and provide a point of co-ordination for our activity.

Professor Bill Spence has now stood down from the role of Vice-Principal with the end of his second term on 31 January. Bill has been an exceptional colleague and can point to many achievements during his tenure. We're delighted that Bill will remain at Queen Mary, working on his world-leading research in the School of Physics and Astronomy.

2.2   Vice-Principal (Education)
Interviews for a substantive appointment to the VP Education position take place in early March and we are optimistic of being able to make a very strong appointment to this role. We would hope that any new appointment would be in post towards the end of the Academic Year. This would allow for a handover with Professor Stephanie Marshall, who is taking forward plans to strengthen our education activity as our Interim Vice-Principal (Education).

2.3   Vice-Principal (Science and Engineering)
Professor Wen Wang has taken on the role of Vice-Principal and Executive Dean (Science and Engineering) following the departure of Professor Edmund Burke last summer. I'd like to thank Wen for his ongoing work and commitment in this role. We will shortly be initiating an international search for a substantive appointment to this role. Internal applications will be welcomed and encouraged.

2.4   Vice-Principal (Policy and Strategic Partnerships)
Dr Philippa Lloyd has now taken up this role, joining us from the Department for Education, where she was Director General for Higher and Further Education. Philippa will play a lead role in our engagement with key agendas at the local, national and international level, and will also lead our work on addressing the many policy issues connected to Higher Education. Philippa is meeting with colleagues from across the institution to understand how she can support activity and has already started to help drive forward key initiatives, such as our Life Sciences ambitions at Whitechapel.

3   External Environment

3.1   Fees
There continues to be considerable speculation about the potential outcome of the review currently being undertaken by the Government into the funding of post-18 education. The sector continues to expect a reduction in fees for UG Home students, without an equivalent increase in government funding to fully address any resultant shortfalls in fee income. We continue to scenario plan for the worst case situations, ahead of the finalisation of the review. This had been expected at the end of February, but given the prevailing political climate it is anticipated that this will be pushed back into March or April, or even later in the year.

The speculation on fee levels has happened alongside press coverage that a small number of universities are in significant financial difficulties, following a series of increasingly competitive student recruitment cycles. In response to this speculation, the Chair of the Office for Students, Sir Michael Barber, has been clear in stating that the Office for Students would not step in to prevent a University from going out of business.

3.2   Brexit
There continues to be a high degree of uncertainty about the outcomes of the Brexit process, which is very concerning for universities and our staff and students. We have provided support for our colleagues from EU27 countries through the pilot process of the EU Settlement Scheme, which has included hosting information sessions with our legal adviser Eversheds. We had committed to meeting the costs for the application fee for this process, although the Government has now announced that the fee will be removed/refunded.

Like most organisations, we are deeply concerned about the prospect of a 'no-deal' Brexit. We have a contingency planning group in place, which is looking to consider the impacts on our staff and students, as well as on the day-to-day operations of our campuses.

It is imperative that we continue to collaborate with our colleagues across the EU, and actively apply for research grants from EU sources, noting that the UK Government has committed to underwrite these funds. I am pleased to see that our staff are continuing to win significant research funding through the EU.

3.3   Unconditional Offers and 'Grade Inflation'
The issue of unconditional offers remains prominent in the media, with Government and the Office for Students (OfS) providing regular statements on the problems (from their

perspective) with the increase in these types of offers. We have been looking at Queen Mary's position on this issue. Our Outstanding Potential Award (OPA) scheme permits unconditional offers to be made to candidates where there is great promise but where a range of circumstances may have inhibited their potential to achieve higher grades at school. All candidates are interviewed prior to an OPA offer being made. QMSE is supportive of this approach in particular focused areas, noting the care applied through the process and its alignment with our values. This is markedly at odds with the narrative being outlined in the media of unconditional offers simply being used as a marketing tool to increase income, regardless of the quality and potential of the candidate. Having said this we are not planning to extend our current scheme to other Schools or Institutes, noting that we currently admit 9% of our students through this route. We will continue to keep the scheme under review.

'Grade inflation' is another topical issue that has been well covered in the media. The UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) has undertaken a consultation on potential changes to the degree classification system. Following input from Senate members and other colleagues, Queen Mary submitted its response to the consultation in early February. This full response is attached as Appendix 1.

Queen Mary is aware that there is an issue with differential attainment, where BAME students are not achieving at the level that should be expected, when considering their entry qualifications and looking at outcomes for other students. It is imperative that we address this and we will continue to identify this as a main objective within the Going for Gold initiative, even though this could come into conflict with the Government's agenda to tackle 'grade inflation' more generally. We have discussed this issue with the Chair of the OfS, Sir Michael Barber, who was receptive to our approach.

4   Student Recruitment

This section outlines the current position regarding applications to start studying in September 2019 (correct as of 11 February).

4.1   Undergraduate
The following key points are highlighted:
- The undergraduate admissions position is looking positive, with applications up 7% compared to this time last year, and offers up by 4%. Applications across the sector as a whole are static compared to last year, while for our UCAS defined competitor group they are up 9%.
- Our applications from EU27 countries are up 10%, compared with an increase for the sector as a whole of 1% and for the UCAS competitor group of 5%.
- Offer-making has been particularly focussed on overseas applicants, recognising the greater time sensitivity for attracting this cohort.

4.2   Postgraduate Taught
The following key points are highlighted:
- The overall PGT admissions position continues to be strong, with an increase of 28% in applications and 24% in offers made.
- For Home (UK and EU) students, applications are currently 1% up, although offers made are 9% behind this point last year. Applications from UK students are up 14%, but EU applications continue to lag compared to last year's cycle, with a decrease of 21%.
- For overseas PGT applications, applications are currently up by 32% compared to last year and offer making is up 28%, continuing the positive trend we have seen since the start of the 2019 entry cycle.

4.3 Postgraduate Research

- Following the 31 January studentship application date (a key census point in the PGR cycle at Queen Mary) applications are up 35% overall compared to last year.
- Approximately 800 applications were received in the period 21 to 31 January and were pre-screened and released to Schools and Institutes for selection. Offers are currently up 8% compared to last year.

4.4 Recruitment and Conversion Activities

The following activities are being undertaken, with a focus on international students:

- February and March are key months for recruitment, when there is a significant uplift in PGT applications from South Asia. All recruitment staff are active in-country, meeting prospective students and holding follow-up meetings with UG and PGT applicants. Several Schools are engaged in overseas recruitment activities over the next couple of months.
- In terms of conversion activities, offer holders are now receiving newsletters from the Global Engagement team advising them on next steps and providing them with the latest news from Queen Mary. Offer holder meetings have started this month in-country, and as part of the new Future Global Leaders Forum we have international students developing new social media friendly content for our conversion communications.

Activity in support of the recruitment of Home students is as follows:

- Queen Mary has been working with an external agency to improve our conversion activity, and Marketing and Communications are now rolling out an improved UG conversion plan. Colleagues from the central Marketing and Student Recruitment team are working with School marketing leads to ensure co-ordination of activity.
- Planning for the Clearing and Adjustment campaign will commence this month and there will be a focus on ensuring that Queen Mary is visible to Clearing and Adjustment audiences as early as possible (further to sector research and recommendations).
- A PGT open evening on 13 February is being actively promoted.

5 New Strategy

We are nearing the finalisation of a new 10 year strategy for the University. I'd like to thank all colleagues who have contributed to this process, via the all-staff workshops in May/June; the extended Senior Leadership Meeting of approximately 100 colleagues in November; and the discussions that have taken place within Faculties and Professional Services over recent months.

A final draft of the strategy will be shared with colleagues in early March, and feedback and comments will be encouraged and welcomed. In addition, there will be a meeting of the Senior Leadership Group on 12 March, to discuss the strategy and its objectives for our University. This is in advance of the strategy being taken to Council for discussion, challenge and final approval.

In developing the strategy and its objectives, we have considered the external environment for all universities and how we will ensure that Queen Mary firmly establishes itself as one of the world's leading higher education institutions. We will focus our efforts on excellent education and student experience, and research and innovation, while continuing to preserve our unique character and mission. We have identified a growth scenario that can deliver these objectives in a sustainable and quality controlled manner, recognising for example the space constraints that we face on our London campuses. Our Faculties, the cross-cutting Vice-Principals and Professional Services have all drawn up initial enabling plans, which have been developed alongside (and have informed) the overall strategy.

In developing the strategy, it has been evident (and would not surprise colleagues) that 'business as usual' is not a viable option, based on our current ways of working and on the external environment. It is clear that to deliver our new strategy, we will need to undertake a number of changes to how we operate. The nature and prioritisation of these initiatives will be shared and discussed with staff as we move to implementing our new strategy, following its approval at Council.

6   Events on Campus and Freedom of Speech

There have been no issues since the last meeting relating to events on campus and freedom of speech that require flagging with Senate. A separate paper is being prepared to update Senate on plans to review the Freedom of Speech Policy in the light of recent guidance from the EHRC on freedom of expression.

7   Other Matters

I will report orally to Senate on other matters that may have arisen between the preparation of this report and the Meeting.

Colin Bailey, 20 February 2019

1. Does the adoption of a UK sector-wide statement of intent represent an effective approach to meeting the challenges outlined in the report?

a. Yes
b. No
c. In part

Please explain your response.

The question (and the consultation) presumes that the sector has accepted in full the conclusion that 'unexplained' changes in grade profiles have been caused by grade inflation. This is not the case, and further research to investigate other drivers and risks of the increase in attainment is required, alongside review of the points identified in this report.

This said, we cannot be complacent regarding public perceptions and media attention. A statement of intent will enable the sector to help inform the media narrative by highlighting the wider range of changes and developments that have contributed to rising student attainment. There are already a range of statements of this type; the sector must ensure that any new statement is a) required, and b) acted upon if it identifies specific actions.

2. What other approaches could be explored to address the issues at a UK sector-wide level?

Much of the relevant information is already publically available and the processes here are already transparent. Attention might be better directed towards raising awareness that these policies and statements are available, and perhaps by presenting them in a more standardised format (though without implying standardised approach). Examples include Academic Regulations, degree classification algorithms, and borderline classifications policies. It would be helpful to promote better understanding of the sector, and of the justification and benefits of institutional autonomy in the design of policy, within the context of national expectations and standards.

In recent years, much attention has been directed towards the need to use the full range of marks available, up to 100. Many external examiners have commented upon this, and institutions have reconsidered their policies accordingly. This has meant that the First Class zone now forms a real, rather than a theoretical, 30 per cent of the classification scale. Review of marking practices rather than (or in addition to) review of classification schemes could be beneficial.

3. **What do you consider a reasonable period for a provider to review its practices and enact appropriate changes?**
   The issue of alleged grade inflation has considerable political salience and needs to be responded to rapidly. However, this should not be at the expense of a reflective approach. A review of the policies outlined in the consultation could be completed relatively swiftly, but if 'appropriate changes' are required, any timeframe would be dependent upon the nature and extent of those changes, and how they might affect past, as well as current and future, students. Two years would seem to allow scope to review the current diversity of practice, to develop new approaches that align with institutional objectives, and to have those new approaches in place.

4. **How can the statement of intent be taken forward by the different national higher education systems of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland within their national quality and regulatory frameworks?**
   The various QA fora would be well equipped to promote debate on these issues, together with special interest groups such as the Russell Group, to formulate joined-up responses. The statement of intent should make clear the regional and institutional differences, and the reasons behind that autonomy. The sector should push for further research to include potential variables missing from the report analysis; improvement in student motivation, ability and diligence, marking and examination procedures, grading boundaries and the treatment of borderline students

5. **Are the evidence areas proposed at Table A for inclusion within a 'degree outcomes statement' appropriate for supporting an institution to identify potential 'grade inflation' risks and provide assurance to maintain public confidence?**

> 5a Yes
> 5b No
> **5c in Part**

Please explain your response:

Again, this assumes that we have accepted the problematic conclusions of the report in full, which is not the case. That said, a statement could help to identify a range of potential reasons for the increase in student attainment. For the statement to be comparable across institutions the evidenced areas need to be quantifiable rather than descriptive; marking practices will not be consistent between (or necessarily within) institutions statement and extensive narratives would be required to explain these differences in line with QAA subject benchmarks. This may bring more confusion than benefit. There is possible value in comparative quantitative data, but this could be disproportionately burdensome for the benefit achieved and has the potential to be misused/used out of context when made publicly available.

6. **Do you consider there to be merit in gaining assurance from an 'external advisor on academic standards'?**

> **6a Yes (please explain your response)**
> 6b No (please set out any other mechanisms for enhancing external assurance)

In line with expectations from the QAA, a considerable amount of externality is already built into the quality assurance processes: external advisers are used for programme approval, external examiners for ensuring adherence to fair and open marking practices, and external panellists for periodic reviews of academic departments. Queen Mary sees potential value in the proposed new role. We currently have an External Member, the Academic Registrar of another institution, who sits on our Degree Boards and specifically comments upon regulatory issues and questions of equity and standards. This has proved very helpful in the review and development of academic policy.

There are additional questions here, however – would the external adviser be reporting *on* the institution, and to whom? What would qualify them for the role, and how would they be appointed? It is debatable whether an external examiner could simply be 'promoted' to this role – external examiners are appointed primarily for their subject expertise, and while they serve an important role in the management of standards they may not always be equipped to comment on national performance levels, etc. We should be aware of the limitations of the external examining system, and should not introduce an additional layer of administration unless we are convinced it will provide meaningful input. We should be aware that, if these advisors were to report nationally, this would lead to further systems of rankings and league tables, which may not be constructive.

7. **What are the:**

> **7a opportunities and/or 7b challenges associated with including the commitments to strengthening the external examiner system in the statement of intent?**

Opportunity
- to recognise the importance of the external examiner role and increase institutional support for those undertaking the role.
- to set up a national register to ease the nomination of externals.
- to maintain the current system of 'critical friends' in sharing best practice.
- If they have 'core' responsibilities then these 'core' statements need to be issued at a national level. Who would be responsible for this, and what kind of information should they be provided with at a national level?

Challenges
- more training/monitoring may deter staff from undertaking the role.

- the role ceases to be 'critical friend' and more of a box ticker.
- The primary experience of external examiners is in their subject knowledge and experience with marking practices rather than with regulatory frameworks. They can give helpful input, but may not be sufficiently informed to give advice on overarching classification algorithms, etc. They will not necessarily have a sector-wide perspective, as they will be commenting based on their personal experience in the institution(s) where they have worked.
- Externals have long been part of the assessment and classification process and have not stopped the perceived grade inflation. They may even encourage it through facilitating benchmarking against institutions who have inflated more aggressively.

8. What are the:

8a opportunities and/or
8b challenges
associated with enhancing components of the UKPSF relating to external examiners?

As above in question 7. We would await the outputs of the Advance HE pilot before commenting further.

9. What are the barriers to implementing the recommendations in 'Understanding degree algorithms', particularly the publication and explanation of degree algorithm practices?

None in particular – degree algorithms should already be publicly available as part of each institution's regulations. Students are (or should be) provided with full details on progression rules and how module marks/failure affect their overall award. Arguably this also enables some students to play the system to concentrate on certain modules/assessments to achieve a threshold grade rather than develop subject knowledge more broadly, but this is a consequence of necessary transparency. Queen Mary already publishes all of this information, but does not currently publish the logic behind each of our policies. While some high level information might be appropriate, particularly on degree algorithms, this would not seem to be a helpful precedent in a more general sense.

Degree classification may exacerbate the risk of grade inflation but is not the primary cause. Significant inflation has been observed in HE systems that do not classify degrees. This point should not be lost in focusing upon the more narrow subjects of this consultation.

10. Should the statement of intent contain a provider's explanations of:

10a   weighting of marks? **Yes**/No
10b   'zones of consideration'? **Yes**/No
10c   discounting' low performing modules? **Yes**/No
10d   PSRB influences on algorithm design? **Yes**/No

Please explain your response:

All of this information is required in order to ensure transparency of approach, and it is simple to provide. These details are already available online as part of our Academic Regulations. If formulated into a formal statement, that should also detail when and why these policies are exercised. Consideration should be given to the level of detail on exceptional cases, particularly those where an institution makes adjustments to meet its duty under the Equality Act – this should preferably be achieved through redesign of schemes on a more inclusive basis so that the same schemes can apply for all students without the granting of exceptions.

Consideration might be given as to whether borderline classification policies should be reviewed across the sector, as these create a great diversity of approach on top of differences in classification algorithms. It may be asked whether borderline policies are required at all at this stage, as marking practices improve.

11. Does the proposed classification description in Annex A provide an appropriate reference point for degree classification practice?
11a   Yes
11b   No

Please explain your response:

The high level description are valuable in providing a common explanation of what is meant by each classification, but the detailed descriptors are of concern. These do not allow for subject differences or requirements for vocational programmes and reduce PSRB competencies to a pass/fail statement. The descriptor for the fail category would benefit from adjustment - a student may have fulfilled some of the criteria but may not have acquired sufficient credit for award. Many institutions benchmark their classification mechanisms against their direct peers and it is unclear what would be gained by a system-wide classification descriptor beyond the high level descriptors.

12. Do you have any proposals for substantive changes to the classification criteria? Please explain your response.

We suggest dispensing with the detailed descriptors and retaining only the high level ones, which do have a more universal aspect.

More generally, the proposals focus on external perception management rather than considering the more substantive question of the viability of the current system. The proposal focuses further on the classification system when perhaps more nuanced expressions of student achievement should be considered alongside classification.

13. Do you agree that the proposed classification description should be incorporated into national quality assurance and regulatory frameworks, as is appropriate for different national contexts? In England, this would mean the use of the proposed classification description as 'sector-recognised standards' as defined in section 13(3) of HERA.

Yes, but only for the high level descriptors.

14. How should the proposed classification description be incorporated into:

14a Institutional Practice
To define marking criteria for markers and levels of attainment for students at assessment level, and to make learning outcomes and skills outputs from modules and programmes more commonly understood between institutions in terms of language.

14b Other Relevant documents or frameworks
It could be included as standard text within the HEAR to explain students' levels of academic attainment.

15. What are the:
15a Benefits/15b Challenges, and/or / 15c "national considerations of using a shared sector metric to inform institutional self-assessment of degree classifications over time?"

Benefits
This could allow institutions to develop clear narratives to explain institutional changes that may affect classification outcomes (for example, changes to algorithms). The same metrics could be employed at programme level to aid in monitoring progress within institutions.

Challenges
A shared sector metric would need to be fully researched and approved by each institution. It risks becoming another tool by which to rank universities, which is unlikely to aid with any alleged grade inflation. Management of historical data would be complex, as would distilling data down to faculty and programme levels. Any metric would need to better acknowledge the value of 2:2 and Third Class degrees, which are not appropriately valued in the current dynamics.

National considerations
The outcomes of such a metric must be kept in context; i.e. not used to make unintended recommendations. Any shared metric will inevitably be seen as benchmarking. Any shared metric would not be able to capture the effect of differences in modular structures and summative assessment on final classifications.

16. How should a sector metric for degree classifications over time be defined?

This could form part of an institution's annual self-evaluation document.

17. How can sector reference points be better used, with more consistency, by external examiners to support institutions to protect the value of qualifications over time?

Consider might be given to a nationally developed information pack to give to all externals, creating a common set of standards and expectations (to be expanded upon with institution-specific materials and inductions).

18. Should the sector explore the steps that could be taken to remove, or reduce the impact of, the inclusion of upper degrees (1st and 2.1 awards) in algorithms used to rank university performance?

> **18a**   **Yes**
> 18b   No
> **Please explain your response:**

This is an unhelpful measure, and while so-called 'good honours' are used as a ranking tool it *will* fuel inflation, even if not explicitly or intentionally.

Regardless of the classification achieved, a student who has achieved the degree has met the requirement of the degree and as such has met all required learning outcomes – this is still an achievement. Removing the label 'good honours' will give 3rd/2.2. graduate confidence to apply for jobs/further study. Equally ,removing the label will benefit student wellbeing and confidence during their studies when they receive marks below 60. 'Good honours' can be misleading for employers; the award denotes subject knowledge only and doesn't necessarily mean "good employee". Students may focus on university-led extra curricula activities (at the expense of their studies) to improve their employability which is included in the HEAR but not in their overall classification.

19. What should be the parameters and remit for a UK-wide task and finish group on the long-term sustainability of the UK's degree classification systems?

We see limited merit in the creation of such a group. If constituted this should be a general 'working group' as "task and finish" group suggests that this is a pure reaction to the report, rather than a group specifically interested in finding out the drives behind degree classifications over time, which in turn will ensure the long-term sustainability. Will any such group have the ability to implement change? Will it ever "finish"?

This group could have served a better purpose if it had met prior to this consultation, if it is/was to exist at all, in order to understand the full range of factors influencing the increase in higher classification outcomes

It is hard to imagine that the regulation of mitigating borderlines could be delimited nationally, whilst standardising classification is superficially appealing it would likely prove difficult to implement.

If constituted, the group should act on the findings of the report and carry out further research into the growth in student attainment. The groups should include employers, to explain the reasoning behind their alleged perception that standards have dropped.

20. Which of the following options for reforming or enhancing the degree classification system should be considered in more detail? (Please indicate Yes/No)
> i. Introduction of new upper award - for example, a starred first **NO**
> *(IHSE – Better to work within the current classification systems with knowledge of intrinsic problems and systematically improve where necessary.)*
> ii. Introduction of a 'cohort ranking' - for example, providing additional information on graduate's position in the grade distribution **NO**
> iii. Resetting the classification boundaries - for example, moving up by 10 marks so 80 = 1st and so on **YES** (so that it we can justify any rejection of the proposal)

iv. More regular review of Subject Benchmark Statements to keep pace with improvements in teaching and learning **YES**
v. Universal HEAR format **YES**
vi. Other (please explain)
vii. No reform required **NO**

20a If other, please explain your response

Review of marking scales and practices would be an important element to consider. While the current system remains in use, consideration should be given to whether and when marks above 80 are routinely given, as there has been a push to use the full range of marks resulting in a larger First Class classification zone in real terms. A more radical approach might be a wholesale change to marking scales, for example the French system of marking on a scale of 20 rather than 100.

Cohort rankings might be considered, but are problematic where cohorts are small and have been observed to negatively affect the student experience in some disciplines by creating an environment of competition.

21. Do you have any other comments on the proposals that have not been specifically asked in this consultation?

The report assumes that there has been grade inflation and that the increase in 'good honours' rates is unwarranted, therefore any outcome will be tainted by the accusation of spiralling grade inflation. Further research is required to explain the 'unexplained' increased in student attainment, not to rule out grade inflation, but to acknowledge other unquantifiable reasons. Research should include the effect of modularisation and summative assessment on final awards. Arguably the broad sweep of assessments undertaken by students over their degree will balance out any oddities in assessment results.

The proposals do not address potential effects with regard to equality and diversity nor do they address the more pressing issues of attainment of BME students.

More explanation from the sector is required i.e. why certain algorithms are used. This will include the Regulations around progression. Arguably, stricter progression requirements will see a decrease in lower awards being issued (i.e. the lowest achieving students will not receive an award at all and there will be a proportional increase in good honours degrees).

The HEAR has only limited value in this context – it is an enhanced transcript, not a CV, which could include university led extra curricula activity. We need to understand how these are used by employers in the selection process (if at all), this will not address issue of 'grade inflation'