HEPI

Report

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Subject to change: Differing trends in degree classification at the subject level

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About the author

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Executive summary

Increases in the share of first-degree graduates receiving 'good' degree classifications (Firsts and 2:1s) and differing standards between degree-level subjects are two issues that have received a great deal of attention in higher education policy debates. This report explores the intersection between these two issues. In particular, it presents evidence that the share of 'good' classifications has increased much more in some degree subjects than others. It then argues that at least some of these differences are suggestive of greater grade inflation in some subjects than others. In light of the various detrimental effects of this differential grade inflation, the report suggests some actions the higher education sector might take in response.

Key findings:

- **From 2014/15 to 2024/25, there was an increase in the share of undergraduate students graduating from their first degree with a First or a 2:1.** The share of first-degree graduates receiving Firsts rose from 20.6% to 27.8% between 2014/15 and 2024/25. The share of those receiving Firsts or 2:1s rose from 67.0% to 73.4% over the same period.

- **There is substantial variation in these increases among different subjects.** Subjects that have seen an increase of over 10 percentage points in the share of both Firsts and combined Firsts and 2:1s are: Combined and General Studies; Computing; and General, Applied and Forensic Sciences. Subjects that have seen an increase of under 3 percentage points in the share of both Firsts and combined Firsts and 2:1s are: Medical Sciences; Mathematical Sciences; and Physics and Astronomy. Traditional humanities subjects such as History, Philosophy and Languages have seen slightly above-average increases in Firsts but low increases in combined Firsts and 2:1s.

- **Subjects with lower shares of Firsts and combined Firsts and 2:1s in 2014/15 have tended to see greater increases in the shares**

of those classifications in the decade since. This suggests a convergence among subjects in the distribution of classifications, though there are several outliers and the effect is weaker for Firsts than for combined Firsts and 2:1s.

- **The shares of high grades at A-Level have increased by less than the shares of 'good' degree classifications over the same period.** There has also been less variation in these changes between subjects at A-Level than at degree level.

- **It is likely that some of the variation between degree subjects is due to greater grade inflation, rather than actual increases in ability or achievement, in some subjects than others.** One cause of this may be differing assessment methods. Some of the differential variation between subjects may be due to less concerning factors, such as legitimate convergence in classification practices or rising student attainment and improved teaching quality in some subjects more than others. These factors are unlikely to be able to account for all of the variation.

- **Higher education providers and regulators should take a range of steps to ensure greater comparability in the awarding of degree classifications, both across subjects and across providers.** This will tackle the variety of negative effects that differential grade inflation has and improve confidence in degree results across employers, the media and society.

1. Introduction and context

Increases in the share of first-degree graduates receiving 'good' degree classifications (Firsts and 2:1s) and differing standards between degree-level subjects are two issues that have received a great deal of attention. They are perennially favourite subjects in the media and the press.[1] Politicians have also expressed concerns.[2] And, as Chapter 5 of this report illustrates, these issues have been the subject of increasing interest from higher education sector bodies and regulators.

Representatives from all of these categories have expressed concerns that the share of students receiving 'good' degree classifications has risen faster than actual student achievement and that standards in some subjects are higher than in others at degree level – though it should be noted that not everyone agrees these concerns have been accurately stated.[3] Whether real or perceived, these concerns evidently have the potential to undermine public confidence in the quality of UK degrees and the higher education system.

The intersection between the two issues has, however, received much less attention. The aim of this report is to explore that intersection. In particular, it presents evidence that the share of 'good' classifications has increased much more in some degree subjects than in others. It then argues that at least some of these differences are suggestive of greater grade inflation in some subjects than in others and suggests actions that the higher education sector might take in response to this.

Degree classifications over time

The proportion of UK first-degree graduates receiving 'good' degree classifications – Firsts or Upper Seconds (2:1s) – has increased since the 1990s. First degrees correspond to first undergraduate degrees in the vast majority of cases. It is only undergraduate degrees that are consistently subject to the honours degree classification system of Firsts, Upper Seconds, Lower Seconds and Thirds across higher education providers, hence the focus on these degrees in this report.

Figure 1: Share of first-degree graduates awarded Firsts and 2:1s

Year	Share of first-degree graduates awarded Firsts (%)	Share of first-degree graduates awarded Firsts or 2:1s (%)
1994/95	7.0	47.3
2004/05	10.6	53.9
2014/15	20.6	67.0
2020/21	34.8	78.8
2024/25	27.8	73.4

Source: HESA[4]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion of graduates awarded Firsts and 2:1s reached all-time highs. During this period, higher education providers adopted more lenient marking and classification policies. The rationale for these was to compensate for the disruption to students' education caused by the pandemic – although the fact that the share of 'good' classifications rose well above both pre- and post-pandemic levels suggests that grading was made more lenient in absolute terms too.

Since that COVID-era high, the share of graduates receiving 'good' degree classifications has fallen; nonetheless, it remains well above what it was in 2014/15. This report concentrates on changes in degree classifications over this 10-year span, from 2014/15 to 2024/25.

Looking at the headline numbers only tells part of the story. There are substantial variations among higher education providers and degree course subjects, both in the shares of students receiving different classifications and in the trends in those shares. Others, for instance the Office for Students, have already written about these differences between providers.[5] This report will investigate the differences between subjects of study, which are equally notable but have received very little consideration.

The process of awarding degree classifications

Higher education providers have considerable autonomy over the processes by which they determine and award degrees. They can, for instance, choose their own curricula and methods of assessment, their own criteria for awarding individual marks and their own rules and algorithms by which those marks are aggregated into an overall classification. The exception to this are those degrees that also lead to a professional qualification, such as legal and clinical subjects. These are subject to regulation by national professional bodies.

There are nonetheless some processes that are intended to ensure a level of comparability in degree classifications across providers. The most prominent of these is the system of external examiners.

The external examiner system requires that, for the award of honours degrees, the board of examiners assessing a paper include an examiner who is based at another institution. This external examiner, with the advantage of knowledge of the examining and classification processes of at least one other institution, can check that exams are marked and degrees are classified broadly in line with how those processes are carried out at other institutions. Concerns have been raised, however, over the efficacy of this system in maintaining standards, such as claims of pressure being placed on external examiners to approve a high share of Firsts and 2:1s.[6]

This is notably different to the processes by which grades in the main public examinations, such as GCSEs and A-Levels, are awarded. Schools and sixth-form colleges do not have a level of autonomy that is comparable to higher education providers. Instead, written exams are set and marked by national exam boards and extensive processes are in place to ensure the comparability of GCSE and A-Level grades from year to year and across subjects. In many instances, coursework has been phased out too. Chapter 3 says more about these differences.

The degree classification system – fit for purpose?

In light of the issues this report will raise with the functioning of the degree classification system, one response might be that the system as a whole is not fit for purpose and should simply be scrapped (or at least radically overhauled). Critics might point out that the origins of the system lie in early nineteenth-century Oxford and Cambridge; in the over 200 years since, the UK higher education system has undergone innumerable changes, particularly with its great expansion since 1992. And so, they may charge, the degree classification system was designed for a wholly different higher education landscape and is no longer adequate for modern Britain.

Fully addressing these important and interesting arguments and considering the possible alternatives to degree classification is beyond the scope of this report and would raise questions about the fundamental nature of UK higher education. Instead, I proceed on the assumption that, although the degree classification system is not working as well as it could, there is something in it worth salvaging and I shall offer some brief considerations in its support.

The degree classification system's longevity has benefits as well as the drawbacks its critics raise. It is widely known and recognised beyond the confines of academia, particularly by employers, and considered a mark of the quality of UK higher education. In an era in which public trust in the UK higher education system is arguably declining and graduates are facing a difficult job market, abandoning such a widely recognised system could prove costly and lead to confusion.

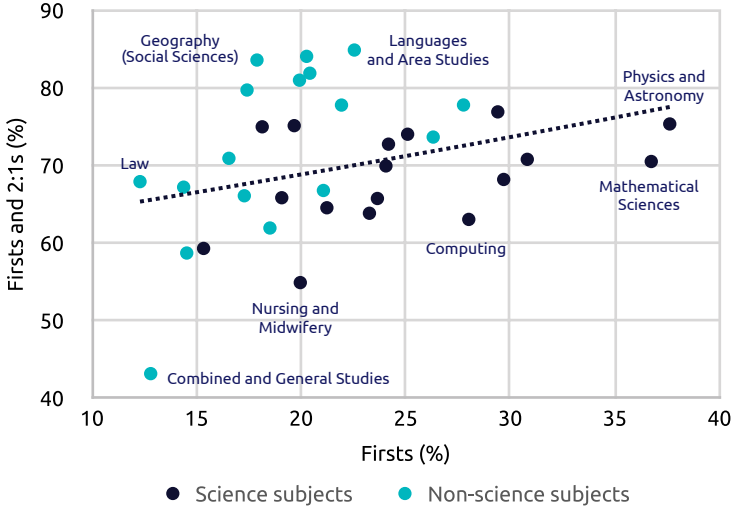
Furthermore, the likely alternatives to degree classifications would not do much to solve many of the issues this report considers. For instance, consider a US-style grade point average (GPA) system, in which students only receive their average mark, without the label of First, 2:1, 2:2 or Third attached to it. Whatever benefits removing those labels would bring, any issues arising in the course of the awarding of the raw marks themselves would still remain.

2. Degree classification statistics by subject

Degree classification shares by subject

Before considering changes in the shares of degree classifications by subject, it is useful to set out the broad picture of variation between subjects in the shares of different classifications awarded.

Figure 2: Share of Firsts and combined Firsts and 2:1s by subject, 2014/15

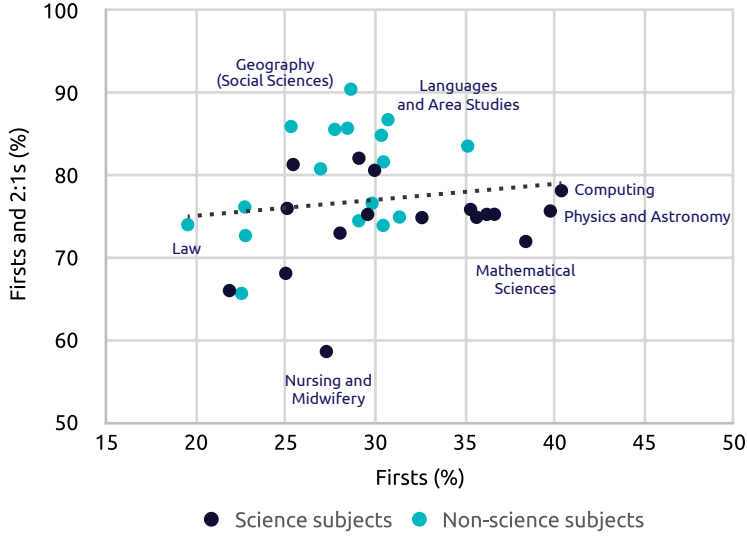


Source: HESA, 'Table 50 – HE qualifiers by subject of study and level of qualification obtained 2014/15 to 2024/25', January 2026 **https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-50**

Subjects with particularly notable classification share profiles have been labelled. There are a few points worth noting from these scatter plots. First, there is substantial variation in the distribution of classifications

between subjects – although this variation decreased from 2014/15 to 2024/25. Secondly, the trendlines indicate that subjects awarding higher shares of Firsts also tend, in broad terms, to award higher combined shares of Firsts and 2:1s. Nonetheless, this is far from a perfect correlation. Subjects above the trendline have relatively greater shares of 2:1s than Firsts. These predominantly include Arts, Humanities and Social Science subjects. On the other hand, subjects below the trendline have relatively greater shares of Firsts than 2:1s. These are largely Science subjects. For instance, Physics and Astronomy and Mathematical Sciences award a high share of Firsts, but relatively middling shares of combined Firsts and 2:1s.

Figure 3: Share of Firsts and combined Firsts and 2:1s by subject, 2024/25



Source: Source: HESA, 'Table 50 – HE qualifiers by subject of study and level of qualification obtained 2014/15 to 2024/25', January 2026 **https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-50**

This reflects a well-established pattern. Non-Science subjects exhibit greater bunching in the 2:1 range, likely due to the more qualitative

nature of their assessments, while Science subjects exhibit a greater range of marks and classifications due to their more quantitative, 'right-or-wrong' assessments.

Degree classification trends by subject

Having established this context, we can now look at the changes in the shares of different classifications from 2014/15 to 2024/25.

The following tables set out the top and bottom 10 subjects by percentage point change in the share of Firsts.

Figure 4: Top 10 subjects for percentage point change in share of Firsts from 2014/15 to 2024/25

Rank	Subject	Percentage point change in share of Firsts
1	Combined and General Studies*	+17.0
2	Performing Arts	+13.2
3	General, Applied and Forensic Sciences	+12.9
4	Allied Health	+12.6
5	Computing	+12.4
6	Education and Teaching	+11.8
7	Geography, Earth and Environmental Studies (Social Sciences)	+10.7
8	English Studies	+10.4
9	Media, Journalism and Communications	+10.4
10	Creative Arts and Design	+10.3

** Note: Combined and General Studies saw a large decrease in the number of graduates from 2014/15 to 2024/25. This is at least in part due to reclassification of courses by HESA, since they have introduced more specific labels for Combined and General degrees falling within other CAH2 groups (such as 'Sciences (non-specific)' in the General, Applied and Forensic Sciences CAH2 group) which they did not utilise in 2014/15.*

Figure 5: Bottom 10 subjects for percentage point change in share of Firsts from 2014/15 to 2024/25

Rank	Subject	Percentage point change in share of Firsts
1	Medical Sciences*	+0.2
2	Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy	+0.9
3	Mathematical Sciences	+1.6
4	Physics and Astronomy	+2.1
5	Economics	+2.7
6	Celtic Studies*	+4.1
7	Business and Management	+4.2
8	Chemistry	+4.8
9	Biosciences	+4.9
10	Engineering	+5.6

**Notes:*

- *Medical Sciences should not be confused with Medicine and Dentistry. Unlike the latter, the Medical Sciences group does not include clinical medicine courses resulting in qualifications to practise medicine. It does include: Medical Technology; Healthcare Science; Biomedical Sciences; Anatomy, Physiology and Pathology. Medical Sciences saw a large increase in its number of graduates from 2014/15 to 2024/25, suggesting a possible reclassification of courses by HESA.*
- *Celtic Studies is by far the smallest CAH2 subject group: between 100 and 200 students received first degrees in Celtic Studies in both 2014/15 and 2024/25.*

Source: HESA, 'Table 50 – HE qualifiers by subject of study and level of qualification obtained 2014/15 to 2024/25', January 2026 **https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-50**

There is considerable variation in the percentage point change in Firsts between different subjects. A number have seen increases of over 10 percentage points from 2014/15 to 2024/25, while others have seen only very modest increases – though all have seen some increase.

The subjects which have seen the greatest increases in Firsts are mostly Arts and Humanities subjects, as well as more applied Sciences. By contrast, those with the smallest increases tend to be quantitative Natural and Social Science subjects. Computing constitutes a notable exception to this, as the one highly quantitative subject to appear among the subjects with the greatest increases in Firsts.

Figures 6 and 7 show the top and bottom 10 subjects by percentage point change in the combined share of Firsts and 2:1s.

Figure 6: Top 10 subjects for percentage point change in combined share of Firsts and 2:1s from 2014/15 to 2024/25

Rank	Subject	Percentage point change in share of Firsts and 2:1s
1	Combined and General Studies*	+33.4
2	Computing	+15.1
3	General, Applied and Forensic Sciences	+11.4
4	Business and Management	+10.7
5	Media, Journalism and Communications	+9.8
6	Materials and Technology	+9.1
7	Sociology, Social Policy and Anthropology	+8.9
8	Architecture and Planning	+8.4
9	Education and Teaching	+8.4
10	Creative Arts and Design	+8.1

**See the note on Combined and General Studies in Figure 4.*

Figure 7: Bottom 10 subjects for percentage point change in combined share of Firsts and 2:1s from 2014/15 to 2024/25

Rank	Subject	Percentage point change in share of Firsts and 2:1s
1	Medical Sciences*	-1.7
2	Celtic Studies*	+0.2
3	Physics and Astronomy	+0.3
4	Mathematical Sciences	+1.4
5	History and Archaeology	+1.5
6	Languages and Area Studies	+1.8
7	Agriculture, Food and Related Studies	+2.2
8	Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy	+3.2
9	Nursing and Midwifery	+3.7
10	Philosophy and Religious Studies	+3.8

**See notes on Medical Sciences and Celtic Studies in Figure 5.*

Source: HESA, 'Table 50 – HE qualifiers by subject of study and level of qualification obtained 2014/15 to 2024/25', January 2026 **https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-50**

A number of subjects appear in both top 10 lists or both bottom 10 lists. Six appear in the top 10 for increases in both Firsts and combined Firsts and 2:1s:

- Combined and General Studies;
- Computing;
- General, Applied and Forensic Sciences;
- Media, Journalism and Communications;
- Education and Teaching; and
- Creative Arts and Design.

Five appear in both bottom 10 lists:

- Medical Sciences;
- Celtic Studies;
- Physics and Astronomy;
- Mathematical Sciences; and
- Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy.

There are some interesting exceptions, however. Business and Management has had the seventh lowest increase in the share of Firsts, but the fourth highest increase in the combined share of Firsts and 2:1s.

Meanwhile, a number of more traditional Arts and Humanities subjects have had increases in the share of Firsts slightly above the overall average of 7.2 percentage points, but notably below-average increases in the combined share of Firsts and 2:1s. These include History and Archaeology, Languages and Area Studies, and Philosophy and Religious Studies.

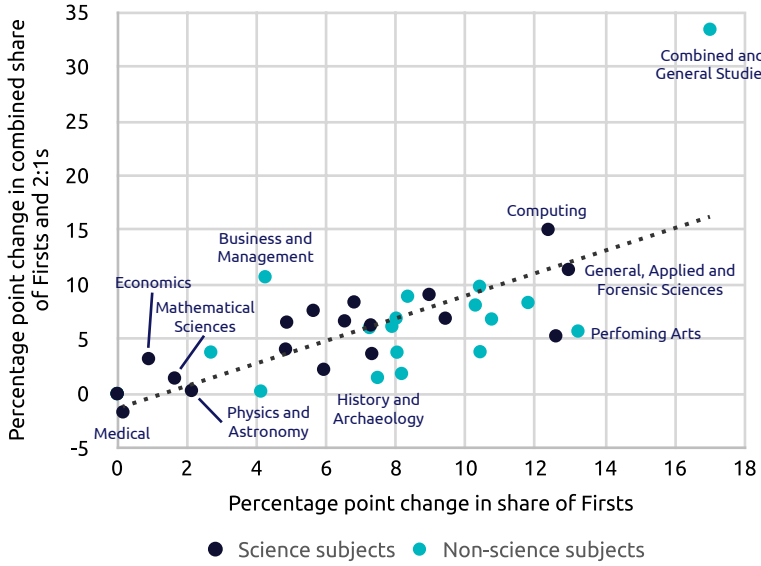
It is therefore worth stressing that it is inaccurate to characterise these trends as a case of Science subjects with lower increases and Humanities subjects with higher increases. Rather, certain kinds of Science and Humanities subjects have seen different trends.

The relations between the two measures are summarised in the scatter plot shown in Figure 8.

Overall, it is true that subjects with a higher increase in the share of Firsts have also had a higher increase in the combined share of Firsts and 2:1s. This suggests that the factors driving the increases are working across the range of 'good' classifications.

But there are once again plenty of exceptions to this overall relationship. Subjects below the trendline in the above graph have had a relatively greater increase in the share of Firsts than combined Firsts and 2:1s.

Figure 8: Percentage point increase in Firsts and percentage point increase in combined Firsts and 2:1s by subject, 2014/15 to 2024/25



Source: HESA, 'Table 50 – HE qualifiers by subject of study and level of qualification obtained 2014/15 to 2024/25', January 2026 **https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-50**

Performing Arts, for instance, has had the second highest increase in the share of Firsts over the period, but a much lower increase in the combined share of Firsts and 2:1s. As previously mentioned, there is also a cluster of traditional Humanities subjects – including History and Archaeology; Languages and Area Studies; and Philosophy and Religious Studies – which have had middling increases in the share of Firsts but very low increases in the combined shares of Firsts and 2:1s.

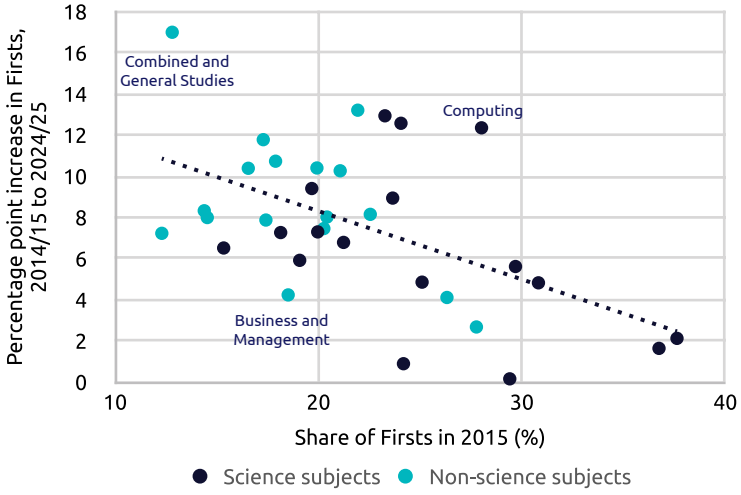
These subjects already had high shares of combined Firsts and 2:1s in 2014/15, but not especially high shares of Firsts; so the fact that there has been a greater increase in the latter share over the subsequent decade seems due to there being more room to grow there than in the former share.

There are generally fewer subjects that have had a notably greater increase in the share of combined Firsts and 2:1s than in the share of Firsts, but Business and Management is a conspicuous outlier here. It has moved from a distribution of classifications that more closely resembles the Sciences to one that more closely resembles the Humanities, as it has seen a greater increase in the share of Firsts and 2:1s than in the share of Firsts, an interesting development for a subject located at the boundary between the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Convergence in degree classifications across subjects

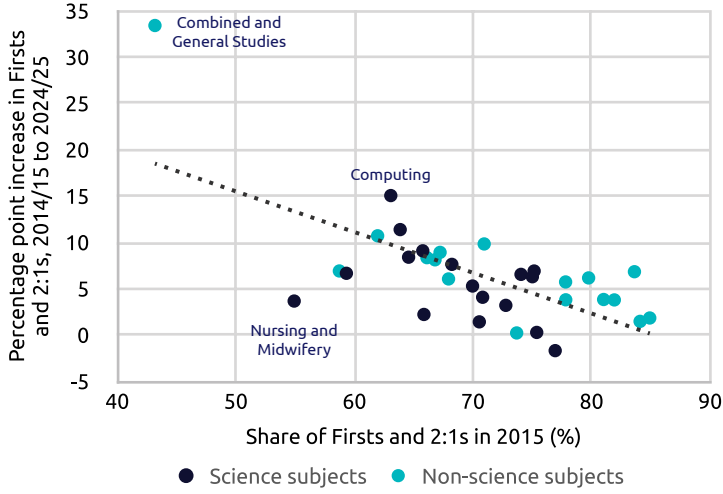
On the whole, the subjects that have had the greatest increase in the shares of Firsts and combined Firsts and 2:1s have tended to be those that started with lower shares in 2014/15. The negatively sloping trendlines on the two scatter plots in Figures 9 and 10 illustrate this.

Figure 9: Share of Firsts in 2014/15 plotted against percentage point change in share of Firsts by subject, 2014/15 to 2024/25



Source: HESA, 'Table 50 – HE qualifiers by subject of study and level of qualification obtained 2014/15 to 2024/25', January 2026 **https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-50**

Figure 10: Combined share of Firsts and 2:1s in 2014/15 plotted against percentage point change in combined share of Firsts and 2:1s by subject, 2014/15 to 2024/25



Source: HESA, 'Table 50 – HE qualifiers by subject of study and level of qualification obtained 2014/15 to 2024/25', January 2026 **https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-50**

As a result, there is now less variation between subjects in the shares awarded of these degree classifications. The standard deviation of the percentages of Firsts by subject has declined from 6.1 in 2014/15 to 5.2 in 2024/25 and, in the case of percentages for combined Firsts and 2:1s, from 8.9 to 6.6 over the same period. Standard deviation measures the average distance of values in a data set from the average (mean), and so the higher the standard deviation is, the greater the variation among values. This decrease in standard deviation therefore means there is now less variation in the shares of degree classifications awarded between different subjects.

This may suggest that, at least in part, there is a legitimate, non-inflationary explanation (Chapter 4 says more about what this means) for

varying subject-specific increases in the share of 'good' classifications. On the whole, subjects have converged in the distribution of classifications, which may suggest they are simply bringing their classification processes more in line with one another.

As the charts and the standard deviation numbers show, this convergence has been stronger in the case of Firsts and 2:1s than in the case of Firsts. This reflects the fact that almost all subjects now award the great majority of their graduates at least a 2:1.

However, once more there are exceptions and, again, this is especially true in the case of the share of Firsts. Computing, for instance, already had a rather high share of Firsts in 2014/15 and, despite this, has seen the second-highest percentage point increase in Firsts of any subject. To an extent, the same is also true in the case of combined Firsts and 2:1s.

On the other hand, Business and Management has seen more limited growth in Firsts, despite starting from a relatively lower level. In the case of Firsts and 2:1s, a similar story is true of Nursing and Midwifery.

So while convergence in classification methods may be part of the reason why some subjects have seen more rapid growth in the share of 'good' classifications than others, it is unlikely to be the whole explanation – especially when it comes to differential increases in the share of Firsts.

Technical notes

There are a number of technical notes relating to the data used in this section. The subject classifications used are the CAH2 subject classifications employed by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). CAH2 is HESA's mid-level subject classification, which provides a sufficient level of granularity for analysis, while still providing sufficient numbers of students to make statistical analysis worthwhile. All subject names in this report are the same as those used for the CAH2 labels. The classification of CAH2 subjects into Science and non-Science subjects in this report is also the same as that used by HESA.

The report generally excludes two CAH2 subject areas from the analysis: Medicine & Dentistry and Veterinary Sciences. This is because the great majority of first degrees in these clinical subjects are unclassified, thus making it inappropriate to include them in an analysis of degree classification shares and trends.

Some CAH2 subjects have seen substantial increases or decreases in the number of first-degree graduates from 2014/15 to 2024/25. Some of these instances may be due to HESA having reclassified which CAH2 group individual degree courses fall under. The report flags these cases where they arise in the course of the analysis. Additional care should be taken in interpreting the results for these subjects.

The full data on which the analysis in this section is based can be found on the HESA website.[7] HESA presents these data broken down by the more granular CAH3 subject groups. The data for CAH2 subjects can be aggregated from these – the first four numbers of the CAH subject code indicate the CAH2 subject group.

3. Comparison to A-Level grade trends

The changes in the distribution of A-Level grades over the period 2014/15 to 2024/25 provide a notable contrast to those in the distribution of degree classifications. This is true at both the overall and the subject level.

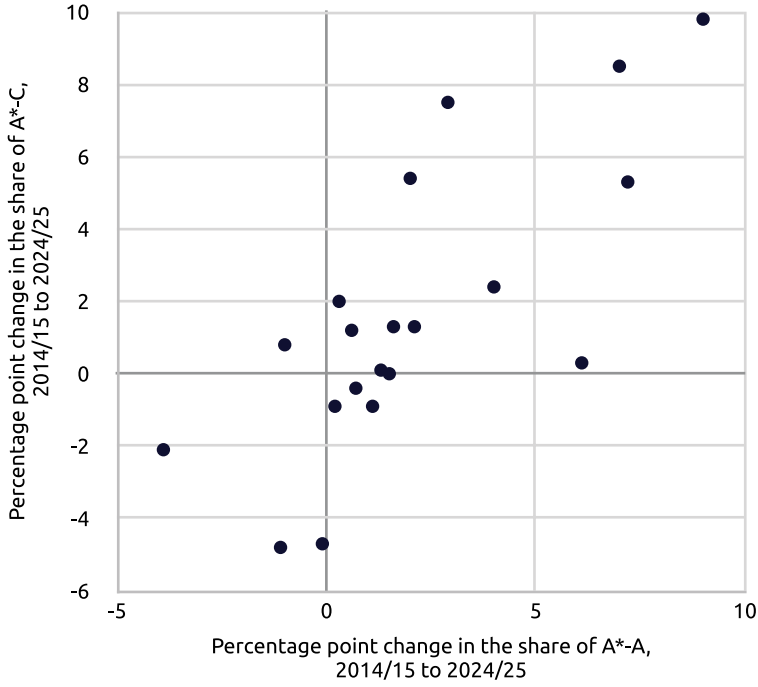
At the overall level, the increase in the share of high A-Level grades has been more modest than the increase in the share of 'good' degree classifications.

The nationwide share of students receiving A*s and As rose by 3.3 percentage points from 2014/15 to 2024/25, and the share of those receiving A* to C rose by 3.8 percentage points. These increases are lower than the 4.1 percentage point increase in Firsts and the 6.0 percentage point increase in Firsts and 2:1s.[8]

Furthermore, when broken down by subject, there is less variation in these percentage point increases in the case of A-Level grades than in the case of degree classifications.[9] The standard deviation for the percentage point change in the share of A* to A by subject is 3.3, and for change in A* to C it is 3.8. By contrast, the standard deviation for the percentage point change in Firsts by subject is 3.8 and for combined Firsts and 2:1s it is 5.8. On the whole, this means individual A-Level subjects have seen more similar trends in grade shares to one another than individual degree subjects have.

Figure 11 shows there is a large cluster of A-Level subjects that have seen only a very modest, or even negative, growth in the share of both A* to A and A* to C grades, whereas the equivalent graph for degree-level subjects (Figure 8) contains no such cluster.

Figure 11: Percentage point change in the share of A-A and A*-C at A-Level by subject (mapped to CAH2 subject groups), 2014/15 to 2024/25*



Source: Ofqual, 'A level outcomes in England' **https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/Alevel/Outcomes/**

We can now return to the differences in how A-Levels are marked and graded compared to how degrees are classified. There are two main contrasts that are especially relevant to the issue of increases in 'good' grades and classifications.

First, A-Level exams are set and marked by national exam boards (and there are also regulations as to the common content for each subject that all exam boards have to include). This means that, with the exception of coursework assessments, schools and colleges do not assess their own

students for A-Levels (although they did do this to some extent for two years during the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019/20 and 2020/21).

Higher education providers, by contrast, examine their own students for degrees. They can choose their own curricula and assessment methods, and, with some exceptions in degrees that lead to regulated professional qualifications such as Medicine and Law, there are no national standards.

The external examiner system is supposed to provide some level of national comparability, but it is a much weaker system of controls than that in place at A-Level. There is no requirement for external examiners to undertake the sorts of rigorous checks to ensure that classifications across institutions are comparable that exam boards have to undertake in the case of A-Level grades, as detailed below.

Secondly, A-Level grade distributions in each subject are determined against the prior attainment of the cohort of students taking those subjects. This is the 'comparable outcomes' approach, which involves sampling the prior attainment of the cohort taking an A-Level via tests and previous results, and matching the distribution of grades awarded to that prior attainment. This is intended to ensure that the same grade in different subjects indicates a comparable level of achievement.

This means that the awarding of A-Level grades has two additional levels of control that the awarding of degree classifications lacks: both across providers and across subjects. It has also been subject to even more political scrutiny. It is therefore not surprising that the shares of high grades at A-Level have grown more slowly between 2014/15 to 2024/25 than the share of 'good' degree classifications, and vary less by subject.

Indeed, this hypothesis holds true when considering degrees in Law, one of the few undergraduate degree subjects which does have nationally regulated content. Law had the lowest share of Firsts awarded of any subject in 2024/25.

It should be noted that the accuracy and fairness of A-Level grades have themselves been called into question. For instance, Dennis Sherwood, author of *Missing the Mark,* has argued that a quarter of A-Level grades

awarded are inaccurate (in the sense that a senior examiner would have awarded a different grade if they had marked the relevant papers), with the share higher in essay-based subjects than in quantitative subjects.[10] There is also evidence that A-Level grades are considerably influenced by students' socio-economic background.[11]

However, if these issues are present at A-Level, then it seems just as likely that they would also be present at degree level. This is because they are either due to problems inherent in examining (such as divergence in the judgements of individual examiners) or to deeper socio-economic issues, rather than anything unique to A-Levels. But A-Level grading at least features the additional level of control and rigour and, likely as a consequence, the stabler grade trends that I have described.

These considerations might suggest that – if regulators or providers wish to address the differential levels of growth in 'good' degree classifications across subjects – they should consider introducing controls modelled on those found at A-Level. The autonomy that higher education providers enjoy, in contrast to the national regulation of the school system, is an important value, and this means these controls should not be as extensive as at A-Level. But this does not mean that universities cannot and should not do more on this front, while striking the right balance between comparability and autonomy. Chapter 6 gives recommendations along these lines.

Finally, it is important to note that students who did not take A-Levels, but rather took vocational qualifications such as BTECs and T-Levels, now make up a large proportion of the students on courses at some higher education providers. Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain the data on grade trends in these qualifications necessary to usefully compare them with A-Level grade trends. If others were able to obtain these data, that would be one worthwhile way of expanding on the research in this report.

4. Explanations for differential trends in classifications between subjects

Inflationary and non-inflationary explanations

There are two sorts of possible explanations for increases in the share of students achieving 'good' degree classifications. These are inflationary and non-inflationary explanations. They apply at both the overall and the individual subject level.

According to non-inflationary explanations, increases in Firsts and 2:1s are a consequence of the accurate measurement of student achievements. This implies that student achievement has genuinely increased from 2014/15 to 2024/25. This could be a result of a range of factors, including schools better preparing students, the quality of teaching at higher education providers improving and technology making it easier for students to learn effectively.[12]

Alternatively, even if student achievement has not increased at the same rate as the share of 'good' classifications, higher education providers may have improved in accurately and fairly assessing students' level of achievement.[13]

According to inflationary explanations, in contrast, the increase in the share of 'good' classifications since 2014/15 cannot be explained by consistent measurement of student achievement.[14] In our case, this implies there are students obtaining Firsts and 2:1s today who are not achieving at a level that would, fairly and accurately measured, have gained them a First or a 2:1 in the past.

The reasons for such grade inflation may be various. Providers might compete for students with the offer of a higher likelihood of obtaining a 'good' classification. Degree classifications contribute to university rankings, providing an incentive for providers to inflate grades. So if providers raise the share of higher degree classifications awarded, they

will make themselves more attractive to prospective students, both directly and indirectly.

Perhaps more likely than these high-level explanations, there are many smaller factors that add up to overall inflation. These may be particularly relevant in the case of subject-level inflation. For instance, examiners may see the share of 'good' classifications rising at other providers or in other subjects and, not wanting to disadvantage their students, raise their own classifications. This is essentially a collective action problem, with no one wanting to halt or reverse the increase in 'good' classifications without the assurance that others will do the same.

Of course, increases in the share of students awarded 'good' classifications could be driven by a combination of inflationary and non-inflationary factors. In the case of the subject-specific trends in degree classification that this report examines, this seems overwhelmingly likely given the range of complex factors at play in the higher education system.

Part of the reason that some subjects have seen faster growth in the share of Firsts and 2:1s than others may be non-inflationary. As well as the more general non-inflationary factors already mentioned, the convergence of classification shares described in Chapter 2 suggests this. This could in part be a result of subjects bringing their assessment and classification methods in line with one another, resulting in greater fairness in classification for students across different subjects.

But as we also saw in Chapter 2, convergence does not provide a full explanation of the differential rates of growth. More broadly, it is hard to account for all these differences among subjects in entirely non-inflationary terms. These differences are often so substantial (especially given the relatively short timeframe) that the non-inflationary explanations do not seem to be able to explain them in their entirety. The rest of this chapter considers a number of other potential explanations for this phenomenon.

It is worth distinguishing inflationary explanations from the concept of unexplained variance. Unexplained variance occurs when variance

in degree classification between different subjects or providers cannot be fully explained by the various non-inflationary factors that have been measured. But this does not necessarily imply that the remaining variance is due to inflationary factors; it may be due to non-inflationary factors that are hard or impossible to measure, such as the quality of teaching or student motivation.

However, the rest of this chapter argues that the unexplained variance in degree classification trends between different subjects is so substantial it is implausible to suppose that all of it is explained by unmeasured non-inflationary factors; therefore, it is almost certainly due at least in part to inflationary factors.

The role of assessment methods

One possible explanation for the differences in changes in degree classifications across subjects is differing assessment methods across subjects.

Many of the subjects with the smallest increases in Firsts and 2:1s have tended to retain a heavier emphasis on assessment by traditional in-person examinations. It is typical for core modules in Mathematics and Physics at Russell Group universities to have at least 90% of the mark determined by in-person examinations.[15]

The reason that Computing, despite its similarities to Mathematics and Physics as a heavily quantitative subject, has seen a much higher increase in the share of 'good' classifications may be due to it relying less on assessment by written exams. The nature of the subject means that coursework-style coding projects are often necessary assessments, but this may have led to an inflationary effect in comparison to Mathematics and Physics.

There are several studies which show that assessment by coursework has an inflationary effect in comparison to assessment by examination.[16] These studies find, in the cases they examine, that switching from exams to coursework results in students achieving higher marks, despite no

change in their actual ability or the quality of teaching. This reasoning would also explain the slower growth in high grades at A-Level – in-person exams form a larger part of the assessment at A-Level than at degree level in most subjects.

That coursework results in higher quality work is hardly surprising: one would expect students to produce better work when given more time to research and write it. If mark schemes do not fully adjust marks on the basis of this difference between exams and coursework, then moving to coursework will likely have an inflationary effect. As the Office for Students has noted, the widespread availability of artificial intelligence tools has increased the inflationary potential of coursework, but it is worth noting that the other considerations mentioned demonstrate an inflationary potential prior to this.[17]

Of course, there are other legitimate considerations that go into the choice of assessment methods. It may be that coursework better assesses certain skills than exams do and provides fairer and more accessible assessment for under-represented groups. For instance, Oxford and Cambridge are the only universities where a greater share of men than women achieve Firsts and they have also retained the heaviest emphasis on in-person final examinations.[18] Furthermore, Jim Dickinson at Wonkhe argues that traditional assessment methods make it 'harder for BAME [Black and Minority Ethnic] students to demonstrate their abilities and competence'.[19]

Nonetheless, those in charge of assessment design at higher education providers should bear in mind the potentially inflationary effects of coursework when choosing assessment methods, and balance these against the other pros and cons of various assessment methods. Furthermore, providers should make some effort to ensure similarity of assessment methods between closely related subjects, at least to ensure comparability of classifications across those subjects.

Student attainment and ability

As already mentioned, one possible non-inflationary explanation for why some subjects have seen greater growth in the share of graduates

awarded 'good' classifications is that these subjects have seen greater improvement in the prior attainment and ability of their cohorts.

In the case of at least one subject, Computing, this is a plausible explanation. Computing has seen a notably large increase in its number of first-degree graduates from 2014/15 to 2024/25. The number of undergraduate degrees awarded in Computing has risen by 81.8%, compared to the increase in undergraduate degrees awarded across all subjects of 19.2% during this period.

It is possible that this has led to an increase in the average ability of students studying Computing, with the subject perhaps attracting more quantitatively able students as its prestige and relevance have grown.

A-Level results provide some evidence for this hypothesis. Computer Science has seen the greatest increase in the share of A* to A and A* to C of any subject from 2014/15 to 2024/25: 9.0 and 9.8 percentage points, respectively.

It is unlikely, however, that this explanation generalises to other subjects. Computing is a rare case of a subject that has seen substantially increased uptake, likely due to broader social and technological changes affecting its perceived status. But this does not apply to most other subjects that have seen large increases in the shares of 'good' classifications but no matching major increase in the number of students on the course.

Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 3, A-Level grades have not, on the whole, increased at the same rate as degree classifications; and the distribution of A-Level grades is benchmarked against the prior attainment of the cohort, unlike the distribution of degree classifications. This suggests that the share of 'good' classifications in many subjects has been rising faster than the prior attainment of these students would imply.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain full data on trends in average entry standards by degree subject over the period this report considers. This is due to methodological changes in how HESA collected these data during that period. So the arguments of this section should be read with that caveat in mind; and, again, if someone were able to

obtain satisfactory data on changing entry standards by subject, that would provide an important avenue for future research on the issue of differential degree classification trends by subject.

Some might instead argue that, while student attainment on entry has not risen, by the end of their degrees it has, due to improved teaching. But in this case it is implausible to suggest that teaching has improved so much more in some subjects than others to the point it explains the very substantial variation in the growth in 'good' classifications across subjects. The inflationary explanations already mentioned still play an important role in this.

Finally, it should be noted that the analysis in this report has been unconditional – it has looked at raw changes in degree classification shares across subject cohorts as a whole, without conditioning these on the demographic or academic characteristics of these cohorts. I still believe we can draw useful and important lessons from this analysis, which I have tried to highlight. Nonetheless, a conditional analysis of these data would also be a valuable future exercise (and as I have indicated, I have been unable to do this largely due to limitations in obtaining the relevant data).

5. Existing actions to address differential grade inflation

So far this report has mostly focused on differential grade inflation by subject as an ongoing and unresolved issue within the higher education sector. But it is only right to note the steps the sector has already taken to address this and related issues. As noted at the start of the report, there has been a reduction in the share of Firsts and 2:1s since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that some of these steps have been effective.

One factor that many thought might be driving grade inflation was the use of lenient degree classification algorithms. Some of these algorithms, for instance, discounted students' weakest marks or ran several calculations and used the one most favourable to the student to determine their final classification. The considerable variation in such algorithms used both within and across providers may well have contributed to subject-specific inflation if some subjects were using more lenient algorithms than others.

The Office for Students (OfS) published a report in 2025 warning of the inflationary effects of such algorithms and advising providers to design classifications algorithms so as to limit grade inflation.[20] And even before the OfS report, many providers had moved towards more uniform and less inflationary algorithms across the range of courses they offer.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published a set of principles for external examining in 2022.[21] While rather broad and vague, they are welcome in that they at least acknowledge issues with the efficacy of the external examiner system in maintaining standards across degree courses. The QAA also published guidance for the writing of degree outcome statements, in which providers give information on their assessment and classification processes and the outcomes these result in. The greater transparency this provides is welcome.

Universities UK (UUK), the collective body representing the leaders of 142 UK universities, has stated its commitment to many of these measures.[22] It has also acknowledged that grade inflation is a problem that its members are trying to address.[23]

These actions are encouraging, but it is still too early to tell how effective they have been. Many of them were only announced or implemented in the years immediately preceding 2025, and so there has not been enough time for any effects to show up in the data considered in this report. As far as subject-specific grade inflation is concerned, it is obviously particularly important that such measures are implemented equally across subjects.

6. Recommendations

1. **Strengthen the external examiner system.** The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) took a step in the right direction in acknowledging there is room for improvement with their 2022 *External Examining Principles*.[24] However, these Principles are still fairly vague and general, and more specific guidance would be welcome. This might include employing more external examiners without any formal current institutional affiliation (such as emeritus postholders). This would help to address both concerns that external examiners are not willing enough to challenge classification practices at other institutions for fear that this could provoke similar challenges to their home institution's practices, and issues with the recruitment of external examiners.

2. **Higher education providers should take steps to ensure comparability of assessment methods across different subjects within the same provider.** They should also monitor whether some subjects' assessment methods are more inflationary than others. For instance, providers could set a minimum recommended share of assessments that are conducted through in-person exams. Deviation below this share by individual subject departments should still be permitted due to legitimate pedagogical rationales for non-exam assessments in certain cases; but departments should generally have to justify this deviation.

3. **Higher education providers, in conjunction with subject-specific academic and professional bodies, should take steps wherever possible and feasible to ensure comparability of content and assessment methods within the same subject at different providers.** This could be modelled on the common content required for undergraduate degrees that also serve as professional qualifications, such as Law and Medicine. These degrees still allow scope for autonomy for providers in designing courses but also have clearly comparable content and assessment methods.

4. **At least in those subjects with a high share of common content across degree courses, there could be tests taken by a sample of final-**

year students studying the same subject at different providers. The results of these tests would not go on the students' academic records. Rather, they could be used by providers and the sector to find out more about standards in the same subject across different providers. They would be able to use the results to see whether students achieving the same classification at different providers perform similarly in the test. An already-existing model for this test might be the Medical Licensing Assessment taken by all Medicine graduates who wish to practise as doctors in the UK.

5. It is only fair to acknowledge the steps higher education providers and sector bodies have already taken in recent years to combat grade inflation. These include greater transparency as to how classifications are awarded, and greater consistency in the classification algorithms used across and within providers.[25] **Providers and sector bodies should continue to implement these measures and ensure that they are applied equally across different subjects.**

7. Conclusion

From 2014/15 to 2024/25, the share of students receiving Firsts rose from 20.7% to 27.8% and the share of students receiving Firsts and 2:1s rose from 67.0% to 73.4%. But there were substantial variations in the rates of increase between different subjects. Subjects with the highest increases, such as Computing, Combined and General Studies, and General, Applied and Forensic Sciences, have seen percentage point increases in both measures over 10 percentage points higher than the subjects with the lowest increases.

There may be some legitimate non-inflationary explanations for this variation. On the whole, subjects with lower shares of 'good' classifications in 2014/15 have seen larger increases, suggesting a convergence in classification standards between subjects. Some subjects may also have seen greater improvements in entry standards and teaching quality than others.

Nonetheless, these factors are unlikely to be able to account for all of the very substantial variation present between subjects. It seems, instead, that inflationary pressures are greater in some subjects than others. The share of 'good' degree classifications has risen faster overall than the share of high A-Level grades, which suggests that improved attainment on entry is insufficient to explain the increases. Furthermore, it is likely that differences in assessment methods contribute to differential grade inflation, with coursework tending to be more inflationary than exams. The increased use of artificial intelligence and large language models by students will likely only exacerbate the inflationary effects of coursework assessment.

Differential grade inflation is a cause for concern, because it leads to students receiving differing recognition for their studies, not on account of the quality of their work but simply because of the subject they chose to study. It is not just those studying or teaching subjects with lower increases that should be concerned by this. Subjects with higher increases may harm themselves and their graduates in the long

term, if grade inflation leads employers and prospective students to regard them as 'soft subjects'.

Therefore, it is in everyone's interests to take steps to combat subject-specific grade inflation. The recommendations outlined in this report include a range of measures to ensure greater comparability in the awarding of degree classifications, both across subjects and across providers.

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Report

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There is considerable concern, including among policymakers, about grade inflation in UK higher education. This report looks at recent trends, with a particular focus on subject-specific data – and finds some subjects have seen far more grade inflation than others. It looks at the reasons why and makes recommendations for tackling the problem.

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