
What's happening to degree classifications?

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Summary

Analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data shows variation between subject disciplinary areas in the trends of proportions of 'good' Honours degrees. The variation is likely to reflect a complex multiplicity of underlying causes. Some system-level and institution-level causes are suggested.

Biography

Mantz Yorke spent nine years in schools and four in teacher education at Manchester Polytechnic before moving into staff development and educational research. He then spent six years as a senior manager at Liverpool Polytechnic, after which he spent two years on secondment as Director of Quality Enhancement at the Higher Education Quality Council. He returned to his institution (by then Liverpool John Moores University) as Director of the Centre for Higher Education Development, where he has researched and reflected on various aspects of the student experience. He has published widely, and his recent work has focused on student retention, assessment and employability. He is a member of the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG) which has made a number of studies of assessment and benchmarking: some of SACWG's research was featured in the *ILT journal Active Learning in Higher Education* 1 (1)(Yorke, Bridges and Woolf, 2000).

Keywords

Honours degree classifications, 'good' Honours degrees, trends, system-level influences, institution-level influences, subject disciplinary areas.

Introduction

Every so often the press erupts with charges that standards in higher education are slipping. This is a difficult charge to deal with: programmes evolve over time, differences in educational priorities emerge, assessment methods change and so on. A conclusive response either way eludes the commentator. Although they will not answer the challenge about standards, data are available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency that allow investigations of trends in Honours degree classifications (another point of potential challenge). What do data for the period 1994-5 to 1998-9 tell us?

What's happening to degree classifications?

First, a step back. In the mid-1990s, the former Higher Education Quality Council commissioned analyses of historical data that were drawn predominantly from the 'old' universities in the UK (HEQC, 1996). These analyses showed that the typical Honours degree award had moved up from a 2.2 to a 2.1. Lewis Elton (1998) subsequently suggested that the cause might lie in changing methods of assessment in higher education, with the proportion of coursework increasing and that of examinations declining. Module-level data from four new universities have recently been analysed by Paul Bridges of the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (Bridges *et al*). His analyses show that, where a module's assessment involves both coursework and examination, the average grade for coursework is typically higher

than that for the examination and that the magnitude of the difference is related to the subject discipline. Thus there is some statistical support for Elton's view.

Degree classification data now cover the whole of UK higher education, enabling recent trends to be computed. The proportion of 'firsts' appears in a number of 'league tables', but is subject to considerable variation from year to year. A more robust index of trend is the proportion of 'good' honours degrees, i.e. of firsts and 2.1s combined.

Analysis of award data for the years 1994-5 to 1998-9 shows that, in English, Welsh and Northern Irish higher education institutions, both the percentages of 'good' degrees and the trends in these percentages vary across the subject areas (see table). In eight of the 17 subject areas, the trends are statistically robust. The overall picture is of trends that vary markedly across the subject areas.

Trends Table

Trends in the percentage of 'good' Honours degrees for 17 subject groupings in universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 1994-5 to 1998-9. Trends in bold type are statistically robust.

HESA Subject Area	% good degrees					Trend (percentage points per year)
	1994-5	1995-6	1996-7	1997-8	1998-9	
Engineering & Technology	43.1	42.9	44.3	45.7	47.5	1.16
Architecture etc	41.2	42.1	43.4	44.5	45.1	1.03
Education	45.8	46.7	46.9	49.4	49.4	1.00
Physical Sciences	47.2	46.9	47.2	48.7	50.3	0.80
Mathematical Sciences	47.4	48.6	48.3	49.9	50.3	0.73
Librarianship & Information Science	53.8	54.5	54.4	55.6	56.9	0.72
Languages	63.0	63.4	64.9	65.0	65.6	0.68
Law	48.4	48.9	52.6	50.0	51.1	0.64
Humanities	63.3	63.4	62.7	63.6	65.6	0.47
Creative Arts & Design	54.1	53.8	54.3	55.0	55.5	0.40

HESA Subject Area	% good degrees					Trend (percentage points per year)
	1994-5	1995-6	1996-7	1997-8	1998-9	
Combined Subjects	51.6	52.0	51.4	50.7	53.4	0.24
Allied to Medicine	55.5	54.7	54.7	56.0	55.8	0.19
Social, Political & Economic Studies	52.8	52.4	51.9	53.3	53.0	0.15
Computer Science	43.7	43.5	43.0	44.2	44.1	0.14
Business and Administration	43.9	44.1	42.8	43.7	43.7	-0.08
Agriculture etc	51.6	45.3	49.0	49.2	49.2	-0.10
Biological Sciences	57.6	57.1	57.0	56.4	57.0	-0.19

Notes

The data cover all higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but exclude subject areas in which first degrees are typically not awarded with Honours. Scottish institutions were not included because of differences in their approach to the awarding of Honours degrees. The Open University was not included because its degrees - recorded only as combined subjects - show a very marked upward trajectory in the proportion of Honours degrees which, because of the large numbers of students involved, would have seriously skewed the findings for that subject category.

Please note: HESA requires the following disclaimer to be included in respect of any analyses based on data that it has provided:

'HESA cannot accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the data by third parties.'

Analysing the trends

The causes of the variation in the table are likely to be related to characteristics of the subject areas concerned, over and above any sector-wide features such as an increase in the use of coursework. The upward trend in Education could, for example, reflect curricular developments stemming from the requirements of the Teacher Training Agency and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), whose emphasis on competence and its assessment is likely to shift the distribution of awards towards the upper end (as would be expected with a mastery-learning model of student development).

In reading the table, the distribution of subject areas between types of institution has to be taken into account. For example, Honours degrees in the humanities, the physical sciences and mathematics are concentrated in the 'old' universities because the other categories of institution tend to locate subjects in these areas within some form of combined studies framework. Other subject areas are more evenly distributed across the institutional spectrum. One key underlying variable that is likely to be influencing the proportion of good degrees is entry qualification, which is related to both institution and subject area.

The moral, for those with an interest in higher education and its diversity? Don't expect whole-institutional data to be very informative. For most purposes, you will need to look closely at what departmental or course-level data can tell you - but you will have to be prepared to do some digging.

Unscrambling the causes of the trends is not a straightforward matter, since there are many factors that could be exerting influence at sectoral and/or institutional levels. Those with a strong cross-sectoral element include the following:

- closure of departments with weak performances in subjects such as the physical and mathematical sciences, with perhaps the assimilation of those subjects into combined programmes (thus edging the entering cohort in these sciences towards the upper end of the entry qualification spectrum);
- characteristics of the entering cohorts;
- a general increase in student commitment to study, perhaps reflecting the recognition of the value of qualifications for subsequent employment . . .
- . . . but, set against this, the need for many students to earn whilst they are studying;
- the adoption of a 'learning outcomes approach' to curricula;
- unitisation of curricula;
- league tables in the press.

Factors likely to have particular influence at the level of the individual institution include:

- changes in approach to teaching and learning;
- changes in assessment methodology;
- changes in the way that final awards are determined;
- institutional mergers;
- franchise arrangements with further education institutions and overseas institutions.

Despite the fact that institutions do feel pressure stemming from the publication of league tables, an institutionally focused analysis of the award data provides little evidence of a systematic inflation of the percentage of 'good' degrees in any individual institution. Beyond any influence attributable to the subject area, the pattern of trends is close to random. For a sector subject to a considerable amount of external scrutiny regarding its quality and standards, this must be welcome news.

However, one recent change in particular may be having an impact across a substantial part of the sector: the move towards the use of expected learning outcomes in the design of curricula. This shifts the assessment process away from norm-referencing towards criterion-referencing in assessment. Put another way, the assessment question is less 'How does the student compare with his or her peers?' and more 'How well does the student satisfy these particular assessment criteria?' And if the criteria are stated more clearly than hitherto, then the probability is increased that grades will rise, not least because students will have a clearer appreciation of what is expected of them by way of performance and can judge their efforts accordingly.

Transparency in assessment is to be commended, since the ability to second-guess the assessor's intentions may not be what the designers of curricula are really seeking to develop (although a generalised 'cue-alertness' has its virtues). A more finely judged performance may be a good thing, but there could be a downside to it. Criterion-referencing could lead students towards a very instrumental approach to their work: doing what is necessary to score well on assessments at the expense of the broadening that is one of the traditional expectations of a period spent in higher education. Some students may find themselves forced to act in this way, simply because they need to give a considerable part of their week to paid employment in order to fund themselves through higher education.

Conclusion

However the trends in degree classifications might evolve, simplistic explanations should be avoided. The range of possible influences is too wide, and their interplay too complex, for easy analysis and tabloidised headlines. The Honours degree classification system implicitly makes claims for pan-sectoral equivalences that probably cannot be sustained. It has probably outlived whatever usefulness it once had - after all, what information does a 2.1 in, say, Submarine Studies from Shippingport College of Higher Education really convey about the graduate's achievements?

References

An extended paper on this theme is set to appear as Yorke M (2002) 'Degree classifications in English, Welsh and Northern Irish universities: trends, 1994-5 to 1998-9', *Higher Education Quarterly* 56 (1). The data presented here refer to universities and colleges in the three countries, and show some minor differences from the university-only analysis of the Higher Education Quality article.

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