

Sector-level analysis of degree classifications over time

Changes in graduate attainment from
2010-11 to 2023-24

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Summary

1. Between 2021-22 and 2023-24 the percentage of UK-domiciled, full-time first degree graduates attaining a first-class or upper second class degree fell. In 2023-24, 77.2 per cent received a first or upper second class degree, compared with 77.6 per cent in 2022-23. This sector-wide decrease of 0.4 percentage points is the third successive year that rates have fallen, having increased considerably between 2010-11 and 2020-21.
2. Despite this progress, there is still an increase of 9.7 percentage points in the proportion of first and upper second class degrees awarded between 2010-11 and 2023-24, and an increase of 13.0 per cent for first-class degrees alone for the same period.
3. This report analyses these graduate attainment rates at a sector level, and uses statistical modelling to assess to what extent the increases and decreases in these rates could be statistically accounted for by changes in the prior attainment of, and distribution of subjects studied by, the graduate populations.
4. We will publish the full analysis, including provider-level data, later this autumn.¹
5. We encourage higher education providers to use this report and our upcoming provider-level analysis to inform their work to ensure their degree classification processes are robust, and award students grades that accurately reflect their attainment and hold their value over time.

¹ Published statistics are available on our website at [Published statistics](#).

Introduction

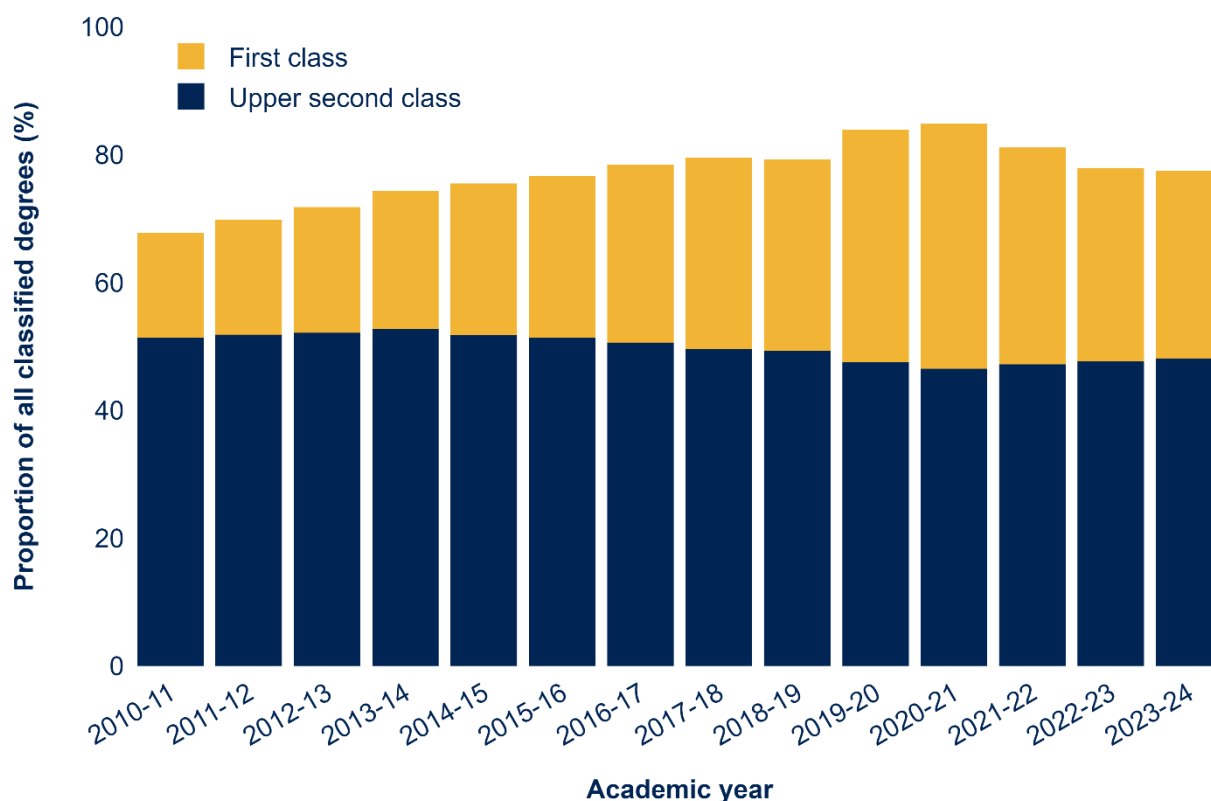
6. Each year we publish analysis of changes in the proportion of first and upper second class degrees awarded over time, using data we receive from universities and colleges.² This report builds on analysis from last year's report to expand the time series to include the academic years from 2010-11 to 2023-24.
7. We report not only on how graduate attainment has changed over this period, but also on the extent to which this can be statistically accounted for by changes in certain characteristics of the graduate population. This analysis has been undertaken at the sector level, and we will publish the full analysis, including provider-level data, later this autumn.
8. The graduate population considered in this report comprises UK-domiciled undergraduates (first degree and degrees including a postgraduate component) who:
 - were studying full-time when they started their course
 - were registered at higher education providers in England
 - graduated in the academic years from 2010-11 to 2023-24
 - attained a classified honours degree.
9. We also only include those who qualified from English providers that awarded classified honours degrees to at least ten students in each of the academic years considered. We use data from 142 providers in the sector-level analysis.

² Copies of the Annual release of the analysis of degree classifications over time can be obtained from [Published statistics](#).

Results

10. Figure 1 shows the changes in the proportions of all classified honours degrees awarded as first and upper second class from 2010-11 to 2023-24.

Figure 1: Change in the proportions of degrees awarded from 2010-11 to 2023-24



11. Between 2021-22 and 2023-24 the percentage of UK-domiciled, full-time first degree graduates attaining a first-class or upper second-class degree fell. In 2023-24, 77.2 per cent received a first or upper second-class degree, compared with 77.6 per cent in 2022-23. In 2023-24 there was a sector-wide decrease of 0.4 percentage points in first and upper second-class degrees compared with 2022-23. The decrease in first and upper second-class awards in 2023-24 represented the third successive year that rates had fallen.
12. Although the decrease between 2022-23 and 2023-24 is smaller than that seen between 2021-22 and 2022-23, this still demonstrates significant progress when compared with the considerable increase in the proportion of first and upper second-class awards attained between 2010-11 and 2020-21. Furthermore, the proportion of students awarded a first-class degree had also fallen for three successive years, from 33.3 percent in 2021-22, to 29.6 per cent in 2022-23, to 28.8 per cent in 2023-24.
13. Despite the progress in decreasing the proportion of first and upper second-class awards over recent years, there is still an increase of 9.7 percentage points in the proportion of first and upper second-class degrees awarded between 2010-11 and 2023-24, and an increase of 13.0 per cent for first-class degrees alone for the same period.

14. Our analysis also shows that none of the sector increase in first-class attainment since 2010-11 can be accounted for by observable changes in a range of student characteristics in the sector graduate population over that period. For that reason, we described this increase as 'unexplained'. Our modelling suggested that the proportion of first-class awards would have been 17.7 per cent in 2023-24, had awarding behaviours been the same as 2010-11, which is 11.1 percentage points lower than the actual level of first-class degrees awarded (28.8 per cent).
15. For first and upper second-class degrees combined, our modelling for explained attainment suggested that the proportion in 2023-24 would have been 67.4 per cent had awarding behaviours been the same as 2010-11, a difference of 9.8 percentage points from actual proportion of degrees awarded across those classes combined (77.2 per cent). Our model leaves open a range of causes for the observed increase, including improvements in actual student achievement over time by students with similar characteristics. However, the observed increase may also reflect other factors that might cause inflation, such as changes to algorithms or to assessment practices not aligned with changes in student achievement.



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