

# News story: Universities told to end grade inflation

Universities must end the steep-rise of 'unjustifiable' first class degrees to maintain the UK university sector's world class reputation, Education Secretary Damian Hinds has said today (24 March).

In the second in a series of interventions across higher education, Mr Hinds wants action taken across the sector to put a stop to artificial grade inflation starting from the next academic year – in a bid to reset the proportion of firsts and 2:1s awarded by universities.

[Analysis](#) published by the Office for Students (OfS) in December 2018 showed that 27% of students obtained a first-class honours degree in 2016/17, up from 16% in 2010/11. Of all university students, 78% now obtain an upper degree (first or 2:1), up from 67% in 2010/11. Analysis of these figures concluded that the scale of this rise cannot be attributed to the rise in pupils' prior attainment or changes in student demographics alone.

The OfS data also revealed that 50.1% of students at the University of Surrey were awarded a first class degree in 2016-17, while at the University of Huddersfield 37.9% of students were awarded a first class degree in 2016-17.

Mr Hinds has today announced a clear expectation that the OfS should directly challenge institutions where they find clear evidence of artificial grade inflation occurring.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

Our universities are world-class and world leading, with four ranked among the top ten in the world, and attracting thousands of international students. At the heart of that global reputation is a trust in the quality and high standards of the education provided.

Unjustifiable, artificial grade inflation threatens that. It cannot be right that students in one year are awarded higher grades for the same level of achievement than those in previous years. We owe it to the hardworking students who have earned those top grades to stamp out this unfair practice.

I expect the Office for Students – when they have their full range of powers – to challenge those institutions that record an unjustifiable rise in the proportion of top degrees being awarded.

The OfS' statutory powers are on course to be strengthened through new regulations due to be laid in Parliament later this year, which once agreed allow the OfS to levy fines of up to £500,000 or two per cent of a university's income (whichever is higher).

Universities found to be damaging students' interests could be subject to sanctions such as placing additional conditions on their registration, fines, or in the worst case scenario removing a university's powers to award degrees.

The UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, is developing sector-recognised standards to ensure that all degree awards are consistent and fair – due to be completed this academic year.

Universities UK, GuildHE and QAA have been undertaking this work as members of the committee on behalf of the full committee and the sector.

Together, these measures will strengthen the regulator's ability to challenge universities with unwarranted grade inflation and hold them to account.

Professor Dame Janet Beer, President of Universities UK, said:

Universities are determined to tackle unexplained grade inflation. The sector's collective will to take ownership of this challenge is strong, as we recognise it is crucial that we keep the confidence of students, employers and the public, in the value of a university qualification.

It is important to draw a distinction between grade inflation and grade improvement, where increased investment in teaching and facilities, as well as students working harder than ever, are leading to legitimate increases in grades. Questions raised by this debate will not halt efforts to ensure every student has the opportunity to get the best outcome from their study – a priority shared by the government and the Office for Students.

We will shortly be publishing the results of a wide-ranging consultation, carried out with sector partners, which includes a statement of intent from universities on how to protect the value of qualifications across the UK.