University of Birmingham: Updated OfS Level 6 Degree Classification Descriptors

1. Background

The Office for Student (OfS) published revised conditions of registration relating to quality and standards (the 'B' Conditions) to take effect from 1 May 2022. Condition B5 (previously '*the provider must deliver courses that meet academic standards as they are described in the FHEQ at level 4 or higher*') now requires a provider to ensure that standards set for its courses comply with certain 'sector-recognised standards'. The 'sector recognised standards' include the FHEQ created and published by the QAA in 2014. The FHEQ is already included in the OfS's regulatory framework and is used in our Programme and Module Development and Approval process. The 'sector recognised standards' also include the recently published degree classification descriptors developed by UKSCQA[1].

The OfS recognise that seeking to regulate degree classification standards in this way may represent an intrusion of institutional autonomy, but the OfS considers that the need to protect standards is '*likely to outweigh considerations of institutional autonomy*.' OfS interventions would be focused on cases where there is evidence that standards are not consistent with sector-recognised standards and would be a proportionate response to legitimate regulatory concern.

2. The Degree Classification Descriptors

The degree classification descriptors set out generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of a bachelor's degree with a particular classification. The OfS state they are generic because they describe the outcomes and attributes expected from any subject of study for that classification rather than from a particular subject discipline. The full classification descriptors, in their original form, can be found on the OfS website[2].

The classification descriptors also include the typical skills and attributes acquired by graduates in the following areas; knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, practical skills, transferable skills, and professional competences (where applicable). The OfS guidance to condition B5 is not prescriptive on how the sector-recognised standards should be used but the guidance does state that the OfS and QAA are likely to need access to students' assessed work in order to assess compliance with this condition.

3. University of Birmingham Updates to the Descriptors April 2024

The OfS descriptors have been modified by the University of Birmingham to include aspects that cover Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the UoB Graduate Attributes. Following their sign-off by University Education Committee in April 2024, it is now requested that:

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[1] UKSCQA outcome classification descriptors https://ukscqa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Frameworks-Annex-with-Degree-classification-descriptions.pdf
[2] Sector-recognised standards https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/53821cbf-5779-4380-bf2a-aa8f5c53ecd4/sector-recognised-standards.pdf

(i)   These modified degree classification descriptors should be either used in this format by Schools/Depts or, alternatively, Schools/Depts can adapt the descriptors or use them to modify their existing descriptors; however, School/Dept descriptors must align with what is described in Appendices 1 and 2.

(ii)   Descriptors are included in guidance material to support marking and moderation processes and Board of Examiners meetings;

(iii)   The degree classification descriptors are provided to external examiners to consider when reviewing samples of marked work and overall standards of awards;

(iv)   If deemed appropriate, the degree classification descriptors are included in guidance material to support the Programme and Module Development and Approval process.

Classification descriptors for Level 6 bachelors' degrees

Typical skills and attributes for each classification for level 6 bachelors' honours

Not Successful	Third-class honours(3rd)	Lower second-class honours (2.2)	Upper second-class honours (2.1)	First-class honours (1st)
The student did not achieve the required course learning outcomes and:	**The student achieved all their required course learning outcomes and:**	**The student achieved all their required course learning outcomes and:**	**The student achieved all their required course learning outcomes and:**	**The student achieved all their required course learning outcomes and:**
did not consistently demonstrate sufficient knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills and attributes;	demonstrated knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills and attributes;	demonstrated strong knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills and attributes;	demonstrated thorough knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills and attributes;	consistently demonstrated advanced knowledge and understanding, cognitive, practical and transferable skills and attributes;
did not consistently demonstrate adequate initiative and personal responsibility;	demonstrated initiative and exercised personal responsibility;	demonstrated initiative and personal responsibility;	demonstrated good initiative and personal responsibility;	consistently demonstrated exceptional initiative and personal responsibility;
did not consistently demonstrate ability to reflect on their work;	demonstrated some ability to reflect on their work;	demonstrated an ability to reflect on their work;	demonstrated an ability to reflect critically on their work;	consistently demonstrated ability to reflect critically and independently on their work consistently;
did not consistently demonstrate problem-solving skills.	demonstrated problem-solving skills.	demonstrated strong problem-solving skills.	demonstrated thorough problem-solving skills.	demonstrated exceptional problem-solving skills.
did not consistently demonstrate the ability to use relevant technologies, including generative AI in a responsible and appropriate manner.	demonstrated the ability to use relevant technologies, including generative AI, in a responsible and appropriate way.	demonstrated the ability to responsibly use relevant technologies, including generative AI, in a range of ways and in an ethical and discipline appropriate manner.	demonstrated the ability to reliably use relevant technologies, including generative AI, in a range of ways and in an ethical and discipline appropriate manner.	demonstrated the consistent ability to use relevant technologies, including generative AI, responsibly, and in efficient and effective ways appropriate to the discipline to advance and extend knowledge and/or understanding.

Knowledge and understanding

A systematic extensive and comparative understanding of key aspects of the field of study, including coherent and detailed knowledge of the subject and critical understanding of theories and concepts, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline.

Not Successful	3rd (pass or threshold)	2.2	2.1	1st
The student's knowledge and understanding of the subject is inadequate, without the required breadth or depth, with deficiencies in key areas.	The student has demonstrated a depth of knowledge and understanding in key aspects of their field of study, sufficient to deal with terminology, facts and concepts.	The student has demonstrated a sound breadth and depth of subject knowledge and understanding, if sometimes balanced towards the descriptive rather than the critical or analytical.	The student has demonstrated sophisticated breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding, showing a clear, critical insight.	The student has shown exceptional knowledge and understanding, significantly beyond the threshold expectation of a graduate at this level and beyond what has been taught.
The student has demonstrated inadequate understanding of subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles, including their limitations and ambiguities.	The student has demonstrated an understanding of subject specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles.	The student has consistently demonstrated an understanding of subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles as well as more specialised areas.	The student has demonstrated a thorough understanding of subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles, and a sound understanding of more specialised areas.	The student has demonstrated an exceptional understanding of subject-specific theories, paradigms, concepts and principles, and in-depth knowledge, if not mastery of a range of specialised areas.
The student has not produced sufficient evidence of background investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study, or has demonstrated an inappropriate over-reliance on technologies such as generative AI.	The student has conducted general background investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study using established techniques, and engaging generative AI technologies as appropriate, with the ability to extract relevant points.	The student has conducted background investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study using established techniques accurately, and generative AI technologies appropriately, responsibly and ethically, and can critically appraise academic sources.	The student has conducted thorough background investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study using established techniques accurately, and possesses a well-developed ability to critically appraise a wide range of sources including through the appropriate and direct application of generative AI technologies.	The student has conducted independent, extensive and appropriate investigation, analysis, research, enquiry and/or study well beyond the usual range, together with critical evaluation, to advance work and/or direct arguments. As appropriate Generative AI technologies have been used at a high-level to significantly develop and ideas and arguments beyond the normally expected disciplinary range.

Cognitive skills

A conceptual understanding of a level that is necessary to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems and comment on research and scholarship in the discipline, with an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge.

Not Successful	3rd (pass or threshold)	2.2	2.1	1st
The student has displayed an over-reliance on set sources. They have not demonstrated an adequate ability to select and evaluate reading and research or have used generative AI technologies inappropriately.	The student has demonstrated the ability to select, evaluate and comment on reading, research and primary sources, and ensure that where generative AI technologies are used, they are referenced appropriately.	The student has selected, evaluated and commented on reading, research and primary sources, sometimes beyond the set range, and as appropriate used generative AI technologies effectively and responsibly.	The student has thoroughly selected, critically evaluated and commented on reading, research and primary sources, usually beyond the set range, and as appropriate, responsibly used generative AI technologies to enhance their analysis.	The student has demonstrated an exceptional ability to select, consider, evaluate, comment on and synthesise a broad range of inter-disciplinary research, primary sources, views and information and integrate references, including as appropriate the seamless high-level use and referencing of generative AI 5technologies as appropriate to the discipline.
The student's arguments and explanations are weak and/or poorly constructed, and they are not able to critically evaluate the arguments of others or consider alternative views.	The student has shown the ability to devise and sustain an argument, with some consideration of alternative views, and can explain often complex matters and ideas.	The student has argued logically, with supporting evidence, and has demonstrated the ability to consider and evaluate a range of views and information. They have clearly and consistently explained complex matters and ideas.	The student has demonstrated the ability to make coherent, substantiated arguments, as well as the ability to consider, critically evaluate and synthesise a range of views and information. They have demonstrated a thorough, perceptive and thoughtful interpretation of complex matters and ideas.	The student has made consistent, logical, coherently developed, and substantiated arguments, and demonstrated the ability to systematically consider, critically evaluate and synthesise a wide range of views and information. They have demonstrated sophisticated perception, critical insight and interpretation of complex matters and ideas.
The student has shown a limited ability to solve problems and/or make decisions.	The student has demonstrated an ability to solve problems, applying a range of methods to do so, and the ability to make decisions in complex and unpredictable circumstances.	The student has consistently solved complex problems, selecting and applying a range of appropriate methods, and can make decisions in complex and unpredictable circumstances	The student has demonstrated thorough problem-solving skills, selecting and justifying their use of a wide-range of methods, and can make decisions in complex and unpredictable circumstances with a degree of autonomy.	The student has demonstrated a wide range of extremely well-developed problem-solving skills, as well as a strong aptitude for decision-making with a high degree of autonomy, in the most complex and unpredictable circumstances.
The student has shown little or no real criticality or creativity.	The student has produced some creative work.	The student has consistently demonstrated creativity and criticality.	The student has shown a high level of creativity, with a critical edge, and originality throughout their work.	The student has demonstrated exceptional creative and critical flair and originality.

Practical skills

An ability to manage one's individual learning and to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline or as necessary for the discipline.

Not Successful	3rd (pass or threshold)	2.2	2.1	1st
The student has not demonstrated sufficient evidence of discipline-specific skills development or application.	The student has demonstrated evidence of developing and applying discipline-specific specialist skills.	The student has consistently demonstrated the development and informed application of discipline-specific specialist skills.	The student has demonstrated a capable and effective application of discipline-specific specialist skills.	The student has demonstrated an accomplished and innovative application of discipline-specific specialist skills
The student has attempted practical tasks/processes but followed a limited, procedural or mechanistic formula, and they contain errors, with little or no independence.	The student has completed practical tasks and/or processes accurately and with a degree of independence.	The student has consistently completed practical tasks/processes mainly independently in an accurate, well-coordinated and proficient way.	The student has performed practical tasks and/or processes autonomously, with accuracy and coordination.	The student has autonomously completed practical tasks and/or processes with a high degree of accuracy, coordination and proficiency.
The student has demonstrated a lack of technical, creative and/or artistic skills in most, or key, areas.	The student has demonstrated technical, creative and/or artistic skills.	The student has consistently demonstrated well-developed technical, creative and/or artistic skills.	The student has a thorough command of highly-developed relevant technical, creative and/or artistic skills.	The student has a full range of exceptional, technical, creative and/or artistic skills.
The student has not presented their research findings clearly or effectively, and their gathering, processing and interpretation of data is unsatisfactory or has been dominated by their inappropriate use of technologies such as generative AI .	The student has presented their research findings, in several formats, and has gathered, processed and interpreted data effectively and used technologies such as generative AI appropriately.	The student has consistently presented their research findings effectively and appropriately in many formats, and has gathered, processed and interpreted data efficiently and effectively using technologies such as generative AI in a responsible, appropriate and ethical manner.	The student has presented thorough research findings perceptively and appropriately in a wide range of formats, and has gathered, processed and interpreted a wide range of complex data efficiently and effectively including as appropriate that developed through generative AI technologies.	The student has presented research findings perceptively, convincingly and appropriately in a wide range of formats, and has gathered, processed and interpreted a wide range of complex data efficiently and effectively making use of generative AI technologies as appropriate to enhance or extend their research and analysis.

Transferable skills and attributes

Personal and enabling skills and attributes appropriate to the discipline, including the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences, the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts.

Not Successful	3rd (pass or threshold)	2.2	2.1	1st
The student is not able to sufficiently express ideas and convey clear meaning verbally, electronically and/or in writing, uses inaccurate terminology, with many errors in spelling, vocabulary and syntax. They have been unable to demonstrate consistently basic numeracy and digital literacy skills, or have used generative AI technologies inappropriately.	The student can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions verbally, electronically and in writing, with clear expression and style. They have also demonstrated numeracy and digital literacy skills including appropriate engagement with generative AI technologies.	The student can consistently and confidently communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions verbally, electronically and in writing. They show a clear, coherent, expressive style, with a range of vocabulary. They have consistently demonstrated strong numeracy and digital literacy skills including the responsible and ethical engagement with generative AI technologies as appropriate.	The student can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions with a high-degree of proficiency verbally, electronically and in writing. They have a clear, fluent and expressive style with appropriate vocabulary. They have a high standard of numeracy and digital literacy skills, including a detailed understanding of, and ability to responsibly apply, generative AI technologies as appropriate.	The student can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to an accomplished level verbally, electronically and in writing. They have shown an accurate, fluent, sophisticated style. They possess exceptional numeracy and digital literacy skills, including the ability to use generative AI technologies responsibly and effectively, at an advanced level, to explore disciplinary ideas and solve problems as appropriate.
The student has made infrequent contributions to group discussions and/or project work	The student has demonstrated the capability to make useful contributions to group discussions and/or project work.	The student has consistently demonstrated the capability to make coherent and constructive contributions to group discussions and/or project work.	The student has demonstrated the capability to make strong, valuable contributions to group discussions and/or project work, and work inclusively, empathically and collaboratively, with an understanding of team and leadership roles.	The student has demonstrated the capability to make clear, authoritative and valuable contributions to group discussions and/or project work, with exceptional teamwork and leadership skills and an ability to work inclusively, collaboratively and empathetically with others
The student has demonstrated little or no self-motivation or ability to manage their learning and/or work without supervision.	The student has shown self-motivation and an ability to manage their learning and work with minimal or no supervision.	The student has consistently shown an ability to systematically manage their learning, and work without supervision whilst demonstrating good levels of self-motivation.	The student has shown a strong ability to systematically manage their learning, and work without supervision whilst demonstrating high levels of self-motivation.	The student has shown an exceptional ability to manage their learning on their own initiative, and work without supervision whilst demonstrating excellent levels of self-motivation.

The student has not demonstrated adequate initiative, integrity or personal responsibility.	The student has demonstrated initiative, integrity and/or personal responsibility.	The student has consistently demonstrated initiative, integrity and/or personal and wider social responsibility.	The student has consistently demonstrated integrity, well-developed initiative and/or personal and wider social responsibility.	The student has demonstrated integrity, exceptional initiative and/or personal and wider social responsibility.
The student has shown little or no ability to reflect on their work.	The student has demonstrated the ability to reflect on their work.	The student has consistently demonstrated a well-developed ability to reflect on their work.	The student has demonstrated the ability to reflect critically on their work.	The student has demonstrated an exceptional ability to reflect critically and independently on their work.

Professional competences

Not Successful	3rd (pass or threshold)	2.2	2.1	1st
The student has not demonstrated achievement of professional competence when assessed against the requirements of a professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB).	The student has demonstrated achievement of professional competence when assessed against the requirements of a PSRB.			
The student has failed to adhere to the appropriate rules and/or conventions set by regulators or the industry.	The student has adhered to the appropriate rules and/or conventions set by regulators or the industry.			