

## **Degree Classification and the University Credit System**

### **Introduction**

The undergraduate degree classification system is a grading scheme for undergraduate degrees (bachelor's degrees) and some master's degrees in the United Kingdom. The system has been applied (sometimes with significant variations) in other countries, such as India, the Republic of Ireland, South Africa, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Australia, Nigeria, Malta and Canada.

### **Some general points: honours degrees, flexibility and variations**

A UK university degree may be awarded with or without 'honours'. When a candidate is awarded a degree with honours, '(Hons)' may be suffixed to their type of degree, such as BA(Hons) or BSc(Hons). The class of an honours degree is based on the average mark of the assessed work a candidate has completed.

The system does allow for a small amount of flexibility and discretion. Candidates may be elevated up to the next degree class if their average mark is close to the assessment requirements; or the median of their weighted marks achieves the higher class. They must also have submitted several pieces of work worthy of the higher class. However, candidates may also be demoted a class if they fail to pass all parts of the course, even if they have a high average.

There are also variations between universities (especially in Scotland, where honours are usually reserved only for courses lasting four years or more) and requirements other than the correct average are often needed to be awarded honours. In Scotland it is possible to start University a year younger than is normal in the rest of the United Kingdom as the Scottish Highers exams are taken at age seventeen, not eighteen, thus four year courses end at the same chronological age as a rest of UK three year course, assuming no 'gap years'.

At Oxford and Cambridge, honours awards or 'classes' apply to examinations, not to whole degrees. In Cambridge, where undergraduates are examined at the end of each part of their course, a student may receive different classifications for different parts. The degree itself does not formally have an overall 'class'. Most Cambridge graduates use the final classification of the final part of their course as the class of the degree, but this is an informal usage. At Oxford, the final honour school results are generally applied to the degree.

In some universities, students who successfully complete one or more years of degree-level study, but choose not to or fail to complete a full degree, may be awarded a lower qualification - a Certificate of Higher Education or Higher National Certificate for one year, or a Diploma of Higher Education or Higher National Diploma for two years. In addition, many universities now operate the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) and all universities in Scotland use the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) enabling easier transfer between courses and institutions.

For full information about the awards system operating in your organisation and details about specific schemes of assessment and degree class descriptors, consult departmental, school or faculty colleagues with responsibilities for ensuring classifications criteria are up-to-date.

### **Degree Classes**

Overleaf is a brief summary of the possible higher education degree classifications, with common abbreviations.

### **First-Class Honours**

In most universities, a First-Class Honours degree is the highest honours which can be achieved, with approximately 10% of all candidates achieving 'a First' nationally.

A minority of universities award First-Class Honours with Distinction, informally known as a 'Starred First' (Cambridge) or a 'Congratulatory First' (Oxford). These forms of degree are seldom awarded. (In Oxford, the Congratulatory First involves a special ceremony where examiners stand and applaud the student receiving the award!)

A 'Double First' can refer to First-Class Honours in two separate subjects, for example, classics and mathematics. Or, alternatively to First-Class Honours in the same subject in subsequent examinations, such as subsequent parts of courses at the University of Cambridge.

### **Second- Class Honours**

Most university graduates are awarded Second-Class Honours degrees. These awards are usually divided into Upper Second-Class Honours and Lower Second-Class Honours: commonly abbreviated to 2:1 (pronounced two-one) and 2:2 (pronounced two-two) respectively.

### **Third-Class Honours**

Third-Class Honours is the lowest honours degree classification in most modern universities. Roughly 20% of students achieving an honours degree receive a Third.

(Until the 1970s, Oxford University awarded Fourth-class Honours degrees, but did not distinguish between "Upper-" (2.1s) and "Lower-Seconds" (2.2s), and so still had four overall classes, like other establishments.)

### **Ordinary Degree**

An Ordinary degree is a 'pass' degree without honours. A number of universities offer straightforward Ordinary degree courses to students. But most students, at least initially, enrol on Honours degree courses. Ordinary degrees are sometimes awarded to students who do not complete an Honours degree course.

### **Aegrotat Degree**

A student who is unable to take his or her examinations because of illness can sometimes be awarded what is known as an Aegrotat Degree. This is an honours degree, but without classification, awarded on the clear understanding that had the candidate not been authorised as unwell, he or she would have passed.

### **Postgraduate Degree**

Regulations governing the progression of undergraduate degree graduates to postgraduate programmes do vary between universities, and are often flexible. A candidate for a postgraduate master's degree is usually required to have at least a 2:2 degree, although candidates with 2:1s are in a considerably stronger position to gain a place on a postgraduate course and to gain funding.

Some higher education institutions specify that a 2:1 is essential before a student can be considered for a 'Masters'. On the other hand, candidates with a Third or Ordinary Degree are sometimes accepted, provided they have acquired satisfactory professional experience following graduation.

### **Doctoral Programmes**

A candidate for a Doctoral programme who does not hold a master's degree is nearly always required to have a First or 2:1 award from undergraduate studies. For popular programmes a First is usually required.