

Universities raise bar as applications surge to record

Greg Hurst Education Editor

Fears resurfaced yesterday that tens of thousands of young people will miss out on university places in the autumn as figures showed that applications have increased by a record 23 per cent.

By late last month 570,556 people had applied for higher education places, up by 106,389 from the same time a year ago. Although the formal deadline closed last month, students can continue to apply, pushing the final number up still higher. Last year 464,167 had applied by this stage, but final applications reached 639,860.

The figures led to calls for the Government to fund more university places. Meanwhile, vice-chancellors appealed to be spared further cuts in the Budget next month. There are already 6,000 fewer university places for the coming year and universities face fines of £3,700 per student if they breach caps on their numbers, prompting many to tighten their admissions criteria by raising the grades required.

Two thirds were first-time applications from young Britons, but the number was swelled by 46,000 people who failed to get places last year, 60,892 applications from older students aged 21-24, and 62,322 from mature students aged 25 and above. All three categories rose sharply.

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (Ucas) said that technical reasons could account for the spike in applications for certain courses, such as nursing and art and design, but admitted that there had been a leap in demand and that entry to universities this autumn would be extremely competitive. There has also been a sharp increase in demand from students from EU countries.

Analysis of the figures showed that some of the most selective universities, including a handful using the new A* grade at A level in offers, experienced only small rises or even falls in applications as the high grades that they demanded appeared to put students off. Cambridge, whose standard offer is A*AA, and Warwick, which is using A* offers for maths and plans to

extend this to economics and PPE next year, both experienced a rise of only 1.3 per cent in applications.

Applications to Bristol were down by 3.6 per cent, while Edinburgh and Cardiff had increases of less than 1 per cent. But Birmingham and Sheffield, both big research-intensive universities, both had a surge in applications of 22 per cent, close to the average. The biggest rises were in applications to smaller teaching-led universities.

Steve Smith, the president of the vice-chancellors' group Universities UK, said: "With this further jump in demand and the continued cap on student numbers in England, it's inevitable that we are going to see even more pressure on places this year and the strong possibility of many well-qualified students missing out."

Professor Smith called on the Government to allocate additional student numbers, but said that it must pay for

23%

Rise in university applications

Source: Ucas

them. Last year ministers allowed another 10,000 places in science subjects but they were unfunded.

David Lammy, the Minister for Higher Education, said that getting into university had always been competitive and emphasised the alternatives, including shorter foundation degrees, advanced apprenticeships and Government-subsidised jobs.

"University is not the only choice for young people," he said.

The most popular courses are vocational, with nursing the most heavily subscribed. The only non-vocational subject in the top ten is English.

