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University applications rise by 8% as recession bites

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A late surge in university applications is putting extra pressure on sixthformers to achieve top grades in their exams.

Figures out today show almost an 8 per cent increase – about 42,000 – in applications for full-time study at university, the biggest in eight years, with many of the applications received in December and January. The recession and rising unemployment have been blamed for the increase.

The high number of applications will mean that pupils who are offered places on popular courses, or at prestigious universities, who do not attain their predicted grades will have less room for manoeuvre.

John Denham, the Universities Secretary, exacerbated the situation when he ordered universities to cut 5,000 places this year, after the Government miscalculated its higher education budget by £200 million. He also reduced the parental income threshold for the means-tested maintenance grant, meaning fewer students will be eligible.

Adults hoping to retrain are also fuelling the boom: the number of applications from candidates aged over 24 rose by 12.6 per cent. This is despite a withdrawal of funding for people wanting to retrain in a different sphere, by studying an equivalent or lower qualification than one they already held.

The figures were compiled by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (Ucas) which manages applications.

Universities and higher education groups welcomed the increase in applications but criticised the Government for restricting places and funding.

Wes Streeting, president of the National Union of Students, said: "It is hugely encouraging to see a record-breaking number of applications to Britain's universities, but we remain concerned about the number of places available as a result of the cap on numbers imposed by the Government. While some had speculated that demand would fall, applicants of all ages are clearly making the correct assessment that it is better to invest now in their education and training.

"We understand the pressures on public finances, but the Government must also make the right long-term decisions. It is surely better to bear the cost of additional university places now than to shoulder the burden of long-term unemployment later."

Diana Warwick, chief executive of Universities UK, which represents vice-chancellors, said: "Applicants are making informed choices and thinking carefully about the value of higher education.

"With the increase in mature applicants, it is encouraging that people are looking to upskill during a difficult time for the jobs market.

"We call on government to ensure that this growth is matched with continued financial support," she added.

Initial figures appeared to show that applications to university had stalled, with a minimal increase on last year reported by mid-December. But applications flooded in in late December and January, as the effects of the recession became more apparent.

The body that represents some of the newest universities and specialist institutions claimed that its

members had seen a greater increase in applications than the national average.

It said Buckinghamshire New University, which gained its status less than 18 months ago, had a 33 per cent increase in candidates. Applications were up by 25 per cent for Leeds College of Art and Design, and by 16 per cent at the University for the Creative Arts, in Kent and Surrey.

David Lammy, the Education Minister, said: "With nearly 8 per cent more people applying to university and colleges in England than this time last year, it is clear that even in these more challenging times people recognise the value of a degree and the investment in their future career."

David Willetts, Shadow Universities Secretary, said: "If a surge of young people want the benefits of higher education, it's a good thing. But sitting in a lecture theatre for three years as an alternative to unemployment is not necessarily the right reason."

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