

Students in hardest fight for university

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SCHOOL-LEAVERS are facing the toughest competition for university places in years, with an 8% rise in applications thanks to a late surge.

The figure, to be announced tomorrow, was boosted by a rush in applicants as the depth of the recession became obvious in December and January; many would rather go to university than try their chances in the present job market.

By some measures, the increase of 7.8% by the main application deadline last month - equivalent to about 42,000 extra candidates - is the greatest for eight years.

Experts have warned, however, of a growing class of angry school-leavers who are turned away from university and cannot find a job either.

Thousands will end up disappointed because of curbs on student expansion announced last month by John Denham, the universities secretary, to plug a £200m funding gap.

While British school-leavers must contend with government limits, there are no such restrictions on recruiting from abroad. Universities, many of which rely on foreign students to boost their finances, are even permitted to bar UK applicants from some places.

Overseas applications have been boosted by the weak pound, with those from the European Union up nearly 14% and those from elsewhere increasing by 9%, according to leaked figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (Ucas).

Universities with the strongest expansion include Exeter, where British and EU applications are up by 18% and other foreign applications by 88%. At Bedfordshire, home applications have increased by nearly 24% and those from abroad have more than doubled.

There has also been a strong growth in interest from older age groups, with the number of applications from candidates over 24 rising by 12.6%.

Les Ebdon, vice-chancellor of Bedfordshire and chairman of the Million+ group of post-1992 universities, called on ministers government to scrap current limits on expansion.

"Funding a university place is cheaper than jobseeker's allowance," he said, adding: "In the summer there is going to be trouble.

"We will have a long hot summer of unemployment and no university places. The government is sleepwalking into a political storm."

David Willetts, shadow universities secretary, said: "If it is a surge of young people wanting 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."

Denham has capped the expansion of university places for British candidates this year at an extra 10,000 - 5,000 fewer than planned - after his department badly underestimated the cost of student grants.

Some 130,000 students from middle-income families face having grants cut or scrapped to help close the funding gap.

The cap on numbers means Tony Blair's pledge that 50% of school-leavers should be going to university by 2010 is virtually impossible to meet without reversing Denham's policy.

Ucas and the universities department this weekend declined to comment before release of the figures, but Denham told institutions last month to "eliminate over-recruitment" of British students or face having teaching money clawed back by Whitehall.

Sixth-form screening

HIGH-PERFORMING comprehensives are "screening" 16-year-olds by telling them they cannot study A-levels unless they score as many as six Bs at GCSE.

Some schools believe a C grade, the government measure of a "good" GCSE, is so devalued that it gives little evidence of ability.

Policies pursued by some comprehensives are now more restrictive than grammars that are open about selection.

At Fortismere school in Muswell Hill, north London, pupils must score five Bs, including English and maths, to study academic subjects at A-level. Other pupils must opt for "applied" A-levels, which are more vocational.

At Fulford school, York, pupils need five Bs for academic A-levels. Steve Smith, the head, said: "You can get students through to a C but a large part of that is staff giving support. For A-levels you have to have independent learning."

Professor Alan Smithers of Buckingham University said: "Sixth-form selection is an unacknowledged feature of our system."