

Rise in applications for 'soft' subjects panned as traditional courses lose out

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A row has broken out over universities "cashing in" on so-called soft subjects such as complementary medicine, as the latest applications figures show their rising popularity.

Overall applications for full-time undergraduate courses received by the end of June were up 5.3 per cent compared with the same time last year, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service said this week.

Spectacular percentage increases in some subject areas over the past year have helped fuel the growth. Among these, a 31.5 per cent rise in the number of students seeking to join degree courses in complementary medicine has drawn fire from critics who argue that many of these programmes represent cynical efforts to boost institutions' income, with little regard for academic standards.

Some have also said the trend is worrying in light of a 19 per cent fall in applications for places on anatomy, physiology and pathology courses, and a relatively low 6 per cent rise in applications for pharmacology, toxicology and pharmacy.

David Colquhoun, professor of pharmacology at University College London, said he was "appalled" by the development. "These courses are basically anti science. Universities that run them should be ashamed of themselves," he said. "They are cashing in on people's wishful thinking when there is no evidence that complementary medicine works. They might as well offer degrees in astrology."

Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine research at the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry, said most complementary medicine degrees were "scandalously unacademic".

He said: "I am quite cross with British universities for teaching these subjects in such an uncritical way. We need to build up research evidence of what works and what doesn't before offering courses."

But Celia Bell, head of Middlesex University's department of natural sciences, which runs courses in Western and Chinese herbal medicine, said the critics were "out of step with the times".

She said: "There are now millions of people seeking complementary medicine treatments, and we have to ensure that the practitioners are safe and competent and properly trained."

The Ucas figures also show some traditional subjects making significant gains. The biggest percentage increase in applications is in engineering and technology

combination degrees, where numbers have shot up by 54 per cent, while civil engineering (up 16.3 per cent) and mechanical engineering (up 8.8 per cent) have drawn some of the largest increases in applications.

In numbers of applications, the biggest rises are in business and administration studies (10,148 more applications this year), management studies (up 6,111), sports science (up 5,601), design studies (up 5,540), and law (up 5,081). Also showing strongly are English studies, social work, drama, economics and mathematics.

Anatomy, physiology and pathology suffered the biggest drop in applications (6,311), followed by information systems (down 1,544) and medical technology (down 1,277).

The figures reveal significant rises in applications from students in European Union accession countries. Applications from the EU as a whole are up 12.8 per cent, with this year's biggest percentage rises from Bulgaria (up 210 per cent), Romania (195 per cent), Estonia (43 per cent) and Cyprus (36 per cent).

Applications from China have recovered from recent declines, rising this year by 14.1 per cent, and there is also strong growth in applications from the US and Canada (both up 15.8 per cent).

Overall applications from overseas students outside of the EU have grown by 4.4 per cent.

UCAS FIGURES

Total applications for full-time undergraduate courses: 494,842

Overall increase compared with 2006: 5.3%

Full-time foundation degree applications: 49,915 (24.4 per cent rise)

Applications from students in England up: 6.3%

From students in Wales up: 0.7%

From Scotland down: 0.5%

From Northern Ireland down: 5.5%

Other EU: 12.8%

Accession countries up: 32.7%

Overseas up: 4.4%

China up: 14.1%

Applications from under-21s up: 6.1%

From 21 to 24-year-olds: 6.2%

From 25 year olds and older: down 0.9%

THE WINNERS

Rise in degree subject applications compared with 2006

- **Engineering/technology combinations**
Applications:1,289
Increase:54.0%

- **Japanese studies**
Applications:1,126
Increase:40.9%
- **Complementary medicine**
Applications: 1,908
Increase: 31.5%
- **Biological sciences**
Applications: 2,816
Increase: 31.3%
- **Tourism, transport and travel**
Applications: 15,263
Increase: 25.8%

THE LOSERS

Fall in degree subject applications compared with 2006

- **Anatomy, physiology, pathology**
Applications: 26,880
Increase: 19.0%
- **Medical technology**
Applications: 10,193
Increase: 11.1%
- **Information systems**
Applications: 13,078
Increase: 10.6%
- **Genetics**
Applications: 2,542
Increase: 10.3%
- **Publicity studies**
Applications: 2,273
Increase: 9.3%

Subjects with more than 1,000 applicants by end of June 2007

Source: Ucas