

February 2012



Is Institutional Diversity at Risk in UK Higher Education?

Briefing note

Charles Levy and Laura O'Brien





The Big Innovation Centre is an initiative of The Work Foundation and Lancaster University. Launched in September 2011, it brings together a range of companies, trusts, universities and public bodies to research and propose practical reforms with the ambition of making the UK a global open innovation hub as part of the urgent task of rebalancing and growing the UK economy, and with the vision of building a world-class innovation and investment ecosystem by 2025.

For further details, please visit www.biginnovationcentre.com

Is institutional diversity at risk in UK higher education?

Earlier this week the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) released new data on applications for 2012 entry to higher education. A headline fall in English applications of 9.9% this year was linked by many to a drop in demand following the planned increase in tuition fees this September. While fees will almost certainly have played a role in this fall, we identified a number of alternative explanations that are also likely to have been a factor.

Worrying us, however, was the sign that a number of individual institutions had seen very significant falls in applications. For example, Roehampton and Goldsmiths saw applications for degree courses fall 27.5% and 22% respectively. Many smaller institutions have seen much larger swings.

This briefing note looks to dig deeper into this data to identify whether this early indicator is a warning of a loss of vital diversity in our higher education sector.

Context

Last week the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a pamphlet 'Institutional Diversity in UK Higher Education'. The aim was to respond to growing concerns that our higher education sector is losing some of its specialist institutions, becoming less diverse in its teaching subjects and that funding was becoming more concentrated at the cost of some of our sector's most interesting features.

The importance of this diversity mustn't be understated. It underpins the variety of ways in which our higher education institutions support our innovation ecosystem. It is widely accepted that as an economy we can only grow and recover from recession through the creation and expansion of innovative businesses. The role of universities here is routinely acknowledged, but too often only as a supplier of knowledge, new ideas and new ways of understanding the world. This ignores the diversity (and the subtlety) of the relationship.

Universities don't just push out ideas. They create spin-out companies to exploit knowledge. They engage with other agents and support genuine co-creation. They deliver contract research. They connect the UK to highly specialist global knowledge networks. They hold key items of innovation infrastructure that reach far beyond their campuses (both technical such as e-infrastructure and social such as well networked individuals). They act as anchors of knowledge intensive activity, tying innovative activities to our towns and cities and operating as a hub in their local economy. They supply graduates with cutting-edge

knowledge both of academic disciplines and, in some cases, business practice and they deliver high-level training for firms and public sector organisations.

It is rare for one institution to be active across all of these areas. It is almost inconceivable that a single institutional model could simultaneously deliver against all of these fields as well as across the lattice of innovative activities in our economy. A diversity of approaches, and hence institutions, is of critical importance to our innovation ecosystem.

Evidence – is diversity at risk?

HEPI concluded that over the past 15 years the sector has become only marginally more homogenous. But they also sounded a warning. This year higher education faces its most significant shake up for more than 20 years. In their view, this will bring new market pressures on institutions, potentially resulting in a shift in diversity that ‘overshadows’ that seen in the past.

By offering a comparison between 2011 and 2012 applications, this week’s release of UCAS application data¹ offers many hints on the likely direction of travel:

- Subjects studied – non-European languages saw the largest percentage fall in applications (21.5%) but steep drops were seen in technologies, combined social sciences and arts, architecture building and planning, and creative arts and design, 17.8%, 17.7%, 16.3% and 16.3% falls respectively. It is not clear however from this early data if this reflects a decline in specialist provision or diversity;
- Type of course – so far it appears that degree applications have held up much more strongly than those for Foundation Degrees or other courses.² Applications for degree course fell by 5.2% compared to 22.1% for Foundation Degrees and 49.3% for these other courses;
- Geography – some places seem to have been hit far harder than others. Analysis from the Centre for Cities suggested that some locations have been hit far harder than others.
<http://centreforcities.typepad.com/.a/6a00e54f73665c88340168e66e4abb970c-pi>
Institutions in Derby, for example, have seen a 20% fall in applications while those in Reading saw a 10% increase. But there doesn’t seem to be a diversity issue here, nor is there a clear regional story;

¹ Accessible from http://www.ucas.com/about_us/media_enquiries/media_releases/

² Such as choices to Higher National Diploma, Higher National Certificate, Certificates of H.E., Diplomas of H.E. courses, including those in social work, midwifery and nursing, and some postgraduate courses in social work.

- Institutional focus – the indications from this data are that the small group of institutions that are highly specialised in teaching creative arts and design courses seem to have seen a particularly steep fall off in applications. The 37 institutions that accept more than 50% of their students for courses in this area³ saw a fall in applications of 17.8% compared to the national average of 7.0%.

Institutional focus	2011	2012	Change
Science, engineering, technology and maths intensive	683,105	652,808	-4.4%
Law, economics and management intensive	6,243	8,146	30.5%
Other social science, arts and humanities intensive	294,539	266,979	-9.4%
Creative arts and design intensive*	80,513	66,198	-17.8%
Total	2,482,195	2,301,811	-7.0%

- * Creative arts and design intensive are a subset of other social science, arts and humanities intensive institutions.
- Size of institution – perhaps surprisingly, the largest institutions seem to have seen the greatest falls in applications. The first table below shows applications to HEIs based on the number of applications received in 2011 and the second compares universities based on the number of accepted applicants in 2010:

2011 and 2012 applications by size band of applications in 2011:

Total Applicants	2011	2012	Change
0-5,000	110,406	103,219	-6.5%
5,001-10,000	139,045	126,646	-8.9%
10,001-20,000	750,773	715,451	-4.7%
20,001-50,000	1,376,810	1,264,870	-8.1%
50,001 +	105,161	91,255	-13.2%
	2,482,195	2,301,441	-7.3%

³ Based on 2010 data for accepted applicants available from: http://www.ucas.com/about_us/stat_services/

2011 and 2012 applications by size band of institution in 2010:

Total accepted applicants	2011	2012	Change
0-1,000	111,815	104,692	-6.4%
1,001-3,000	1,499,458	1,410,121	-6.0%
3,001-5,000	1,915,403	1,771,753	-7.5%
5,001 +	864,213	780,932	-9.6%
	4,390,889	4,067,498	-7.4%

Reflections

As suggested above, this is only an initial data release. These messages must be taken as only early indications given a large number of limitations with the data, including:

- This data covers applications, not acceptances or places at universities. Demand is likely to continue to exceed the available supply of places this year. Future analysis could compare the fall in applications to available places for individual institutions;
- This analysis is based on just two years of data. There is always a real risk from reading trends into what may turn out to be one-off bumps. For example, there are some hints in the data that many individuals chose to apply for a 2011 entry to avoid the fees. Last year saw a 20,000 increase in applicants aged 19-21, so a fall of 25,000 for this age band this year isn't quite such a concern. Similarly the fall in applications seems to be concentrated in potential mature students. But, as Mary Curnock Cook from UCAS commented, the fall is "in the context of some very substantial increases in recent cycles".
- Analysis is based on a subset for which comparable data was available. For various reasons data from six institutions could not be used. See here for further details: http://www.ucas.com/about_us/media_enquiries/media_releases/2012/20120130appdig; and
- Application data is so far only available until the January deadline. A substantial and often varying number of applications will come in before the June formal closing date.
<http://www.economist.com/node/21546003?fsrc=scn/tw/te/ar/pilethemhigh>

Putting these caveats aside, the evidence from this data remains mixed. Some specialist institutions do seem to be being hit hard. The less mainstream non-degree courses taken at our higher education institutions seem to be in free-fall. Yet, on average, the largest

institutions are bearing the brunt of the decline. There is no simple diversity story from this data, but regulators, policy makers and analysts must keep a close eye on subsequent UCAS releases if we are to avoid putting at risk diversity within our higher education sector.

Acknowledgements

This report is a publication from the Big Innovation Centre, an initiative from The Work Foundation and Lancaster University. The content of this report reflects the opinions of its authors and not necessarily the views of the Big Innovation Centre or its supporters.

The Big Innovation Centre is supported by the following companies, public bodies, universities and trusts.

BAE SYSTEMS

 **BARCLAYS**

**Design
Council**


**EDF
ENERGY**

 **Experian™**
A world of insight

 **gsk** GlaxoSmithKline

Google™

Jon Moulton

the guardian

logica

**M
Man**


Unilever

Lord Sainsbury **NESTA** Making
Innovation
Flourish


pwc

Technology Strategy Board
Driving Innovation

HIGHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL
hefce
FOR ENGLAND

UA
UNIVERSITY ALLIANCE


UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

UCL

 **Newcastle
University**

 **The
University
Of
Sheffield.**

 **THE UNIVERSITY
OF EDINBURGH**

 **UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD**

 **UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE**
 **University of
BRISTOL**

Contact details

Big Innovation Centre

The Work Foundation

21 Palmer Street

London SW1H 0AD

info@biginnovationcentre.com

www.biginnovationcentre.com

www.theworkfoundation.com

All rights reserved © Big Innovation Centre (The Work Foundation and Lancaster University). No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form without prior written permission of the publishers. For further information please contact info@biginnovationcentre.com. Trading address: The Work Foundation, 21 Palmer Street, London SW1H 0AD. Registered address: Landec Ltd, University House, Lancaster University, Lancashire LA1 4YW.

