

National

EU student applications to UK universities soar as Brexit draws nearer

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A last-minute rush to study at British universities before Brexit closes the door may be behind a rise in applications from EU students, according to the latest figures for courses starting in autumn.

After last year's slump in applications from European students in the aftermath of the vote - and widespread uncertainty over funding - British universities are reporting an upturn in numbers received by January's deadline for undergraduate entries.

The rise in international applications - including a record number from students outside the EU - helped disguise modest domestic figures showing a 3% fall in applications within the UK, the second successive decline after a 4% drop last year.

Leading universities such as Warwick and University College London said they had seen strong interest from applicants from the UK, EU and other

countries, despite increased competition for students at home and abroad. Prof Sean Hand, University of Warwick's deputy pro-vice-chancellor for Europe, said applications from EU students had risen by 10%.

"Brexit has focused people's attention on the strength of British universities," said Hand, who noted that Warwick was continuing to hold talks with EU universities over closer partnerships. "European students appreciate that universities such as Warwick, with strong international connections in research and teaching, would be a place for the best kind of education."

Prof Anthony Smith, UCL's vice-provost for education and student affairs, said he was delighted by the figures, which included an 11% rise in domestic applications.

"This year's applications reaffirm our status as a global university with one of the biggest multinational student bodies in the UK," he said. "They show that students from the EU and further abroad continue to want a

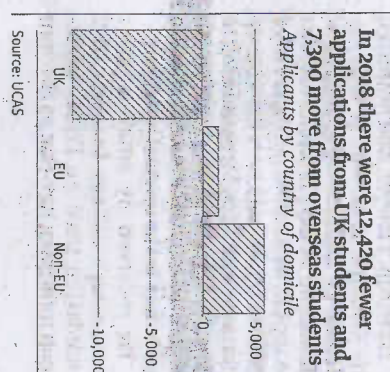


first-class UK higher education, which bodes well for the future post-Brexit." University admissions officers said the government's guarantee for EU students starting in 2018 was viewed by some as a "last chance" to study in the UK on the same terms as UK students for the duration of their degree.

The figures from Ucas, the applications clearing house, show that 43,500 EU students applied for places as undergraduates, a 3% rise from the same point in 2017 and the second highest number recorded, reversing last year's sharp fall.

Fears that Brexit could harm applications from outside the EU were also allayed, with the Ucas data showing a rising numbers of applications

▼ A rise in the number of overseas applications helped offset a 3% fall in UK applicants PHOTOGRAPH: ALAMY



from countries such as China and India. There was even a rise in the number of applications from Mexico which at least one admissions officer attributed to Donald Trump's presidency making the US a less attractive destination for international students. The total number of EU and international applications combined broke the 100,000 mark for the first time.

While China increased its number of applications by more than 2,000 students - a 20% increase over 2017 - university leaders may be pleased by the jump of more than 1,000 entries from India, up by 36% after several years of decline.

The improvement in overseas applications comes as Theresa May last week hinted at a softer stance towards international students, after she admitted that they "have no long-term effect on migration numbers".

The Ucas data showed that sixth-formers in England have a stronger appetite for higher education than ever, despite fears about student debt, with more than 37% of 18-year-olds now applying to go on to university or college this autumn.

There were increases in the proportion of both men and women applying from England, but the gap between the two widened as women outpaced men. About 36,000 more male school-leavers would need to apply to universities to bring their rate up to the same level as women, according to Ucas.