

## Blog: Steep fall in uni application rates? No, there bloody isn't!

Posted on Monday 6th February 2012

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I should have gone to Ladbrokes and put money on it. I used to do undergraduate admissions, so I know these things – and I'd have cheerfully bet 50 quid that, come the end of January, there'd be fistfuls of stories headlining how university applications had plummeted this year, "in the face of the hike in fees". And of course there were. They were dated 30<sup>th</sup> January, but for all the detailed notice they took of the actual figures released the previous day by UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service), they might have been written three months ago, along with the follow-up swipe at the Coalition in general and Nick Clegg in particular.

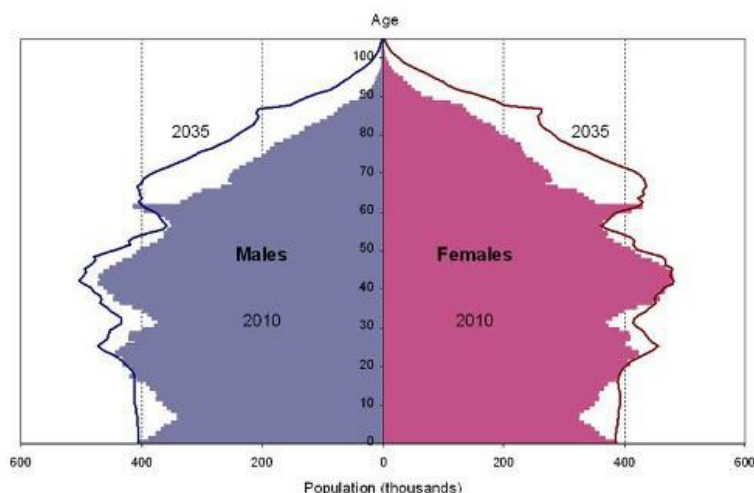
The message they convey is wilfully misleading. Even so, I was busy doing something else and was going to let it pass – until Mariella Frostrup pushed me over the edge. She presents Radio 4's 'Open Book' programme and, ever topical, was discussing a couple of recently published campus novels – both Oxbridge, almost needless to say. At one point she asked her guests what they thought the implications were of "the UCAS report that applications are down by 15 per cent this year" (2<sup>nd</sup> Feb). Despite supposedly knowing something about students and one being a York University professor, neither guest even questioned the figure, but embarked instead on increasingly frenzied speculations about two-tier systems and universities becoming accessible only to the privileged few.

Heaven only knows where the 15% came from, but the programme covers "the best of new fiction and non-fiction", so presumably it hopped across from the fiction bit. The figures most of the media used – certainly for their headlines – were the 7.4% fall in total applications compared to the same time last year, or, if they wanted to rub it in a bit, the 8.7% drop in UK applicants. Even allowing for the likelihood that last year's baseline was somewhat boosted by students applying at the earliest opportunity in order to avoid the fees increase, these figures do seem concerning – or at least they do for the three minutes it takes to read on to the other stats UCAS released and the interpretation they provided. But – surprise! surprise! – few did.

What most missed, therefore, is the childishly simple point that there's a crucial difference between application numbers and application rates. The clue is in the word 'rates', suggesting a relationship between two variables – in this case the actual number of applications and the potential number. Divide the number of applications from an age group by the size of that group in the population, and you get the proportion of the group who've applied: not only a direct measure of demand, but a way of measuring fluctuations in demand without any effect of year-to-year changes in the group size.

Ah yes, those year-to-year changes. You might think that anyone who's lived for any time in the UK would be at least vaguely aware of the post-war baby boom and the generational bulges it produces in our population pyramid. Unfortunately, UCAS didn't think to produce one, or even the statistics for the changes in age group size that they used to calculate their application rates – so I've done so for them.

Estimated and projected age structure of the UK population, 2010 and 2035



Even with a 10-year scale, it's easy enough to see what's happening. The baby boom generation are now in their sixties, their kids are in their forties, and grand-kids in their twenties – having been through university during the nearly 10 years from the turn of the century, in which their age group and therefore university applications were increasing in numbers virtually every year. We've now gone into reverse. This year and for some time to come the 17-20 age group will shrink each year, and, without anything else changing at all, we would expect university applications to fall. And that's the point of using application rates to measure demand – to control for those year-to-year changes.

Time to look, then, at this year's application rates, as reported by UCAS, but not by most of the media. In England, application rates for 18-year olds were down not by 8%, but just 1%. OK, not that big a drop, but concentrated presumably in the most socially disadvantaged parts of the country, discriminating even further against those already severely under-represented in our universities? Well, no again. There was a larger decrease in the application rate from the most advantaged areas than from the most disadvantaged. It would seem that all the headlines about £9,000 fees didn't entirely drown out the Government's message about no first-time undergraduate having to pay any fees at all up-front. Beastly, isn't it, when you wait months for the facts, and then, when they do arrive, they refuse to fit the story!

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