Higher fees led to 17% drop in UK undergraduates

By Patrick Howse BBC News, education reporter

The government says undergraduate numbers have 'returned to record levels'

There was a 17% fall in the number of first year undergraduates at UK universities in the first year of higher tuition fees, new figures show.

In 2012-13 UK universities were allowed to treble their yearly fees to £9,000.

The government acknowledged the fall but stressed that demand for full time higher education has already "returned to record levels".

The Office For Fair Access says it is "concerned" about a 19% in part-time undergraduate students.

Professor Les Ebdon, its director of fair access to higher education, said part-time students are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"They're also more likely to be mature students already in work, 'up-skilling' to improve their current and future employability," he said.

"Any downturn in their numbers is therefore likely to have serious repercussions on the competitiveness of our economy."

The National Union of Students says the decline in part-time students should be "acknowledged as a crisis".

A spokesperson for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Bis) said "new part-time students became eligible for non-means tested tuition fee loans for the first time in 2012".

"This has significantly increased the number of students eligible to receive government support. We have also been working hard to communicate the benefits of part-time study through our student finance tour and with the National Careers Service."

'Direct consequence'

England saw a 12% fall in new full-time undergraduate students overall.

Bis said that figure was influenced by a higher number of students taking up places the previous year, rather than having a gap year.

"A reduction in entrants in 2012 was well documented and the numbers were affected by the significant number of students who opted not to defer their place from the year before," its spokesperson said.

The decline had not continued into the current year, she added.

"Application rates for some of the most disadvantaged young people have risen to an all time high in England and more students than ever before are being successful in securing a place at their first choice institution."

The figures, collated by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (Hesa), are official confirmation of other indications that there was a fall in the number of people going to university last year.

Previously released figures had shown declines in applications and offers of places, and the admissions body Ucas also reported a fall.

In Scotland, where the government still pays for the tuition of Scottish students studying within the country, there was a 2% rise in the number of students taking up places on full-time undergraduate courses.

The academics' union, UCU, however, said the overall decline was a direct consequence of the rise in tuition fees.

The union's general secretary, Sally Hunt, said it was "no great surprise that the number of students going to university fell off considerably".

She also believes there may be long-term effects.

"Only the government seemed to think the policy was progressive and, while we have seen a recovery in the number of people applying to university, the fear remains that some may never fulfil their potential because of the new funding regime," she added.

The Hesa figures also show a 1% decline in non-EU students coming to the UK to study, something that concerns the National Union of Students.

A rise in the numbers of students from China and Hong Kong was off-set by a 25% fall in Indian students.

It has previously been suggested they are being put off from the expense of study in the UK by a fall in the value of the rupee, and by improvements in Indian universities.

The NUS vice-president with responsibility for Higher Education, Rachel Wenstone, said: "For the first time ever the total number of international students, who are fundamental for the long term financial and academic health of UK universities, has dropped."