

HEFCE budget cuts and universities

The impact on engineering courses

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Background

In August 2009, HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council for England) announced its intention to seek savings in higher education teaching budgets of approximately £65 million.

Earlier in 2009, the Government unveiled plans to create an extra 10,000 places on science, technology, engineering and manufacturing (STEM) courses. These places would have their student support costs paid, but would not receive additional funding for teaching costs.

Recognising the importance of a properly funded higher education system to the consultancy and engineering industry, ACE conducted a small-scale survey of the leading engineering universities in England to assess the anticipated impact of the budget cuts and to gauge how widespread the uptake of the 10,000 extra places was.

Conclusions

Despite pressures on higher education budgets, universities continue to support engineering courses. So far, there are no signs that places on engineering courses are under threat, which is positive news for the consultancy and engineering industry.

However, response to the additional 10,000 places has been less than enthusiastic. Universities note that these places do not have associated teaching funding, and that universities could accept these extra places and still be penalised for over-recruitment. This potentially puts universities at a double financial disadvantage.

These findings suggest that the Government's initial attempts to widen access to the engineering profession may turn out to be less successful than hoped. However, there seems to have been no weakening in availability of places on leading courses, despite 2009's economic pressures.

Acknowledgements

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Methodology

A sample of 27 universities offering engineering courses was selected, using the Times Good University Guide 2010 and Guardian University Guide 2010.

The vice chancellors of each were contacted by email, with the following questions:

- 1. Has your institution had to reduce the number of student places on offer as a result of the HEFCE announcement?
- 2. If so, which subjects or teaching areas are likely to lose places?
- 3. What change in numbers of places on engineering courses at your institution do you anticipate for:
 - (a) Undergraduates?
 - (b) Postgraduates?
- 4. If you are reducing numbers of places, when will this take effect?
- 5. Are you planning to offer any of the extra 10,000 STEM places announced, and why/why not?

Twelve institutions responded, giving a response rate of 44 per cent.



Results

Summary

- Three universities intended to cut places on some courses as a result of the HEFCE announcement, but none planned to reduce numbers of engineering places overall.
- Three universities had increased their intake of undergraduate engineering students; four increased their postgraduate intakes.
- Half of the institutions that responded had decided not to offer any of the extra 10,000 places. This was mainly down to the lack of extra teaching funding available, and that the usual penalties for over-recruitment still applied to these places.
- Four institutions had offered extra places, and these had been fully subscribed.

Results in detail

1. Has your institution had to reduce the number of student places on offer as a result of the HEFCE announcement?

Institution Response		Institution Response	
A	No	G	No
B	No	H	Yes, on some programmes
C	No	I	No
D	No	J	No
E	No	K	Yes, on some programmes
F	Yes, on some programmes	L	No

2. If so, which subjects or teaching areas are likely to lose places?

Institution Response		Institution Response	
A	-	G	-
B	-	H	Some rebalancing between programmes, but no cuts overall
C	-	I	-
D	-	J	-
E	-	K	Some niche courses, and those with high levels of ELQ.
F	Some rebalancing between programmes, but no cuts overall	L	-



3. What change in numbers of places on engineering courses at your institution do you anticipate for: (a) undergraduates; and (b) postgraduates?

Institution Response		Institution Response	
A	No change for either.	G	No change for either.
B	No change for either.	H	No change for either.
C	No change for either.	I	52 extra undergraduates. Significant increase in UK PhD and OS MSc.
D	No change for either.	J	No change in undergraduates. Increase in postgraduate places.
E	No change for UK students.	K	Small increase for both.
F	No overall change.	L	Undergraduates: 10% more. Postgraduates: 15% more.

4. If you are reducing numbers of places, when will this take effect?

No institutions answered this question.

5. Are you planning to offer any of the extra 10,000 STEM places announced, and why/why not?

Institution Response		Institution Response	
A	No.	G	Yes - around 130. Had previously asked for more places from HEFCE, but had been rejected.
B	Yes - and filled them all.	H	No - but could have accepted an extra 30-40 over the next three or four years.
C	No - as places are unfunded, so would lose out financially	I	Yes - offered 52; all recruited,
D	No - as places are unfunded, but more postgraduates would be welcome if funding were there	J	No - as unfunded. Not helpful to educate people for free.
E	No - not financially viable as no extra funding for these places.	K	Yes - accepting 50. Were offered 160, but penalties for over-recruitment still apply.
F	Undecided - already at capacity for STEM courses and extra places would require extra resources.	L	Yes - there will be a regional need for engineers as economy recovers