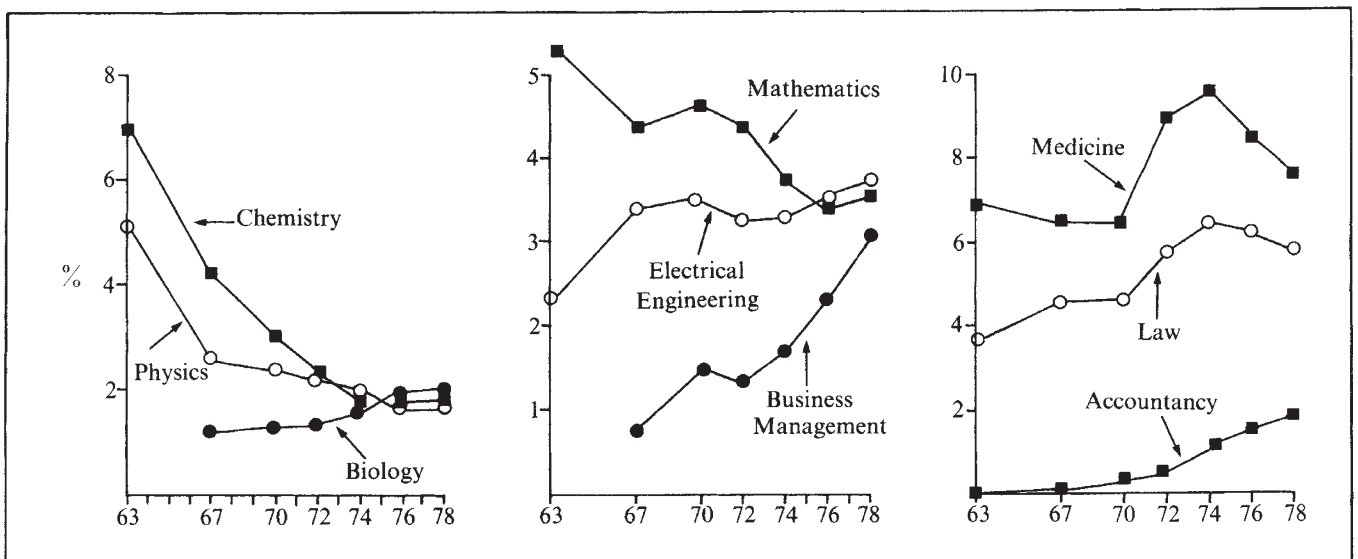


nature

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Popular science



THE above three graphs show changing patterns in popularity of various subjects amongst applicants to British universities over a period of fifteen years. The figures have been compiled from annual reports of the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA), culminating in the Statistical Supplement to the Fifteenth Report, published recently. These reports have over the years consistently listed the number of candidates applying through the UCCA scheme for entry to any British university (excluding the Open University, University College, Buckingham and to a lesser extent three Scottish universities) by their first choice for study.

There were some changes in subject headings between 1963 and 1967 which mean that comparisons must be made a little cautiously (although there seems no evidence that the subject headings are seriously incompatible). Since 1967 the headings have remained the same, however, so there is no reason to doubt that year-by-year comparisons can be made. The figures are percentages of all applicants naming particular subjects as first choice. The total number of applicants in 1963 was 51,596 and in 1978 is about 180,000. Between 1963 and 1967 the number rose to 90,952; it has risen more slowly since then. Only one subject, chemistry, actually has less applicants in 1978 than in 1963.

As with all statistics, some cautions have to be given. These are not figures for admissions to university, so they do not reflect actual changes in size of intake. Very many students naming a preferred subject are happy, or at least willing, to be accepted for another subject. Furthermore, the figures say nothing about the quality of candidates. Many of those who apply simply do not have the necessary qualifications, and cannot be regarded in the final analysis as serious candidates for a university. Also amongst those who are serious candidates, there is probably substantial variation from subject to subject in the quality of applicants. Finally, the figures for 1978 are only estimates, though accurate ones.

What can be claimed is that the graphs represent fairly well the ambitions of 17-year-olds over a period in which a much greater number of students have been able to contemplate university education, and in which society's attitudes to various professions have changed substantially. Perhaps there are two points worth underlining. The first is that the vast expansion in educational opportunities in the 1960s did not stimulate in any way a proportional increase in the number of those doing the 'central' sciences. Secondly, contrary to popular belief, enthusiasm for engineering courses has actually grown fairly steadily for many years. □