Dyson reinvents university with its own degrees

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Education Correspondent

It has already cornered the market in vacuum cleaners and hand dryers but Dyson is not content to stop there. The British company has its sights set on higher education, with plans to provide its own degrees.

Students will pay no tuition fees, earn a salary of £18,000 and end up with an engineering degree apprenticeship after four years. The Dyson Institute until now offered qualifications approved by Warwick University but from September next year will be able to award its own degrees.

It is the first education provider to be given new degree-awarding powers since a shake-up of the system in 2017 by Jo Johnson, then the universities minister. A third of its students are women after the institute, in Wiltshire, removed the need for A-level physics, which is taken by far fewer girls than boys (9,000 compared with 29,000 this summer).

It was founded three years ago as an alternative to a traditional university, with an investment of more than £30 million from Dyson. Applications for the next academic year's intake open today.

Undergraduates work on real-life projects, as well as their studies, alongside Dyson's global engineering, research and technology teams.

A spokesman said: "From day one they contribute to new technologies to improve lives all around the world. It is more than a job and more than a degree, and although the aspiration is that they remain long after graduation, they are not tied to Dyson."

Sir James Dyson, the founder and chairman of Dyson, said: "Being able to award Dyson degrees is a testament to the pioneers who have joined the Dyson Institute. It was borne out of my frustration at the shortage of engineers and scientists and the appalling debt that students incur at university.

"We've been flattered that the undergraduates and their parents have trusted us to take on this important role when they had many options open to them."

He said that the degree was "not for the faint-hearted", adding: "Technology is developing at such speed that rigorous academic study benefits from immediate application. We have a culture where undergraduates are free to experiment and learn through failure."

Until now the programme has been delivered as a partnership between Dyson Technology and Warwick Manufacturing Group, at the University of Warwick. The degree covers the fundamentals of engineering in years one and two and teaches more specific electronics and mechanical engineering skills in years three and four, all supplemented by experience of working at Dyson across different projects and technologies.

Each cohort at the Dyson Institute comprises about 40 undergraduates and it has 150 students in total, of whom 33 per cent are female, compared with an average of 18 per cent on British engineering undergraduate courses.

Last year Dyson undergraduates helped to develop backpacks that use sensors to monitor and record air quality data to help tackle pollution.

Having degree-awarding powers means that the institute will be able to control every aspect of the programme itself, using its own teaching departments, professional services teams and governance structures.

Mary Curnock Cook, the former head of Ucas and now chairwoman of council at the Dyson Institute, said: "There is simply no other degree like this. The combination of hard-core academic study, combined with real work application in one of the most exciting technology companies in the world, makes it a compelling choice for academically minded polymaths with an entrepreneurial flair."

Applicants need at least three A- levels, including maths and an additional science or technology subject, and be expecting grades AAB or above. The institute has, on average, 14 applications for every place available.

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