

Strategic Responses to Student Retention in a Developing Country Higher Education Context

Higher Education Institutional Research (HEIR)

3-4 September 2025

Dr. Nandarani Maistry & Dr. Vikash Jugoo



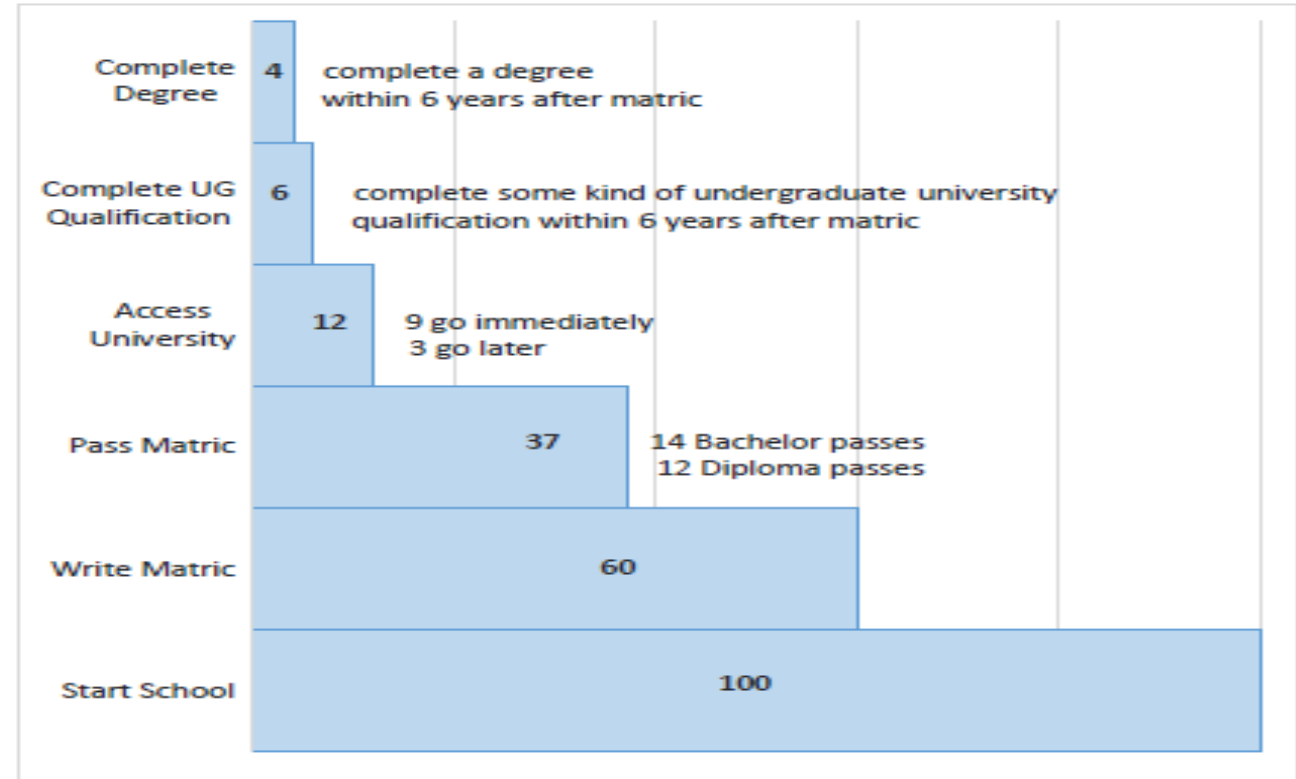
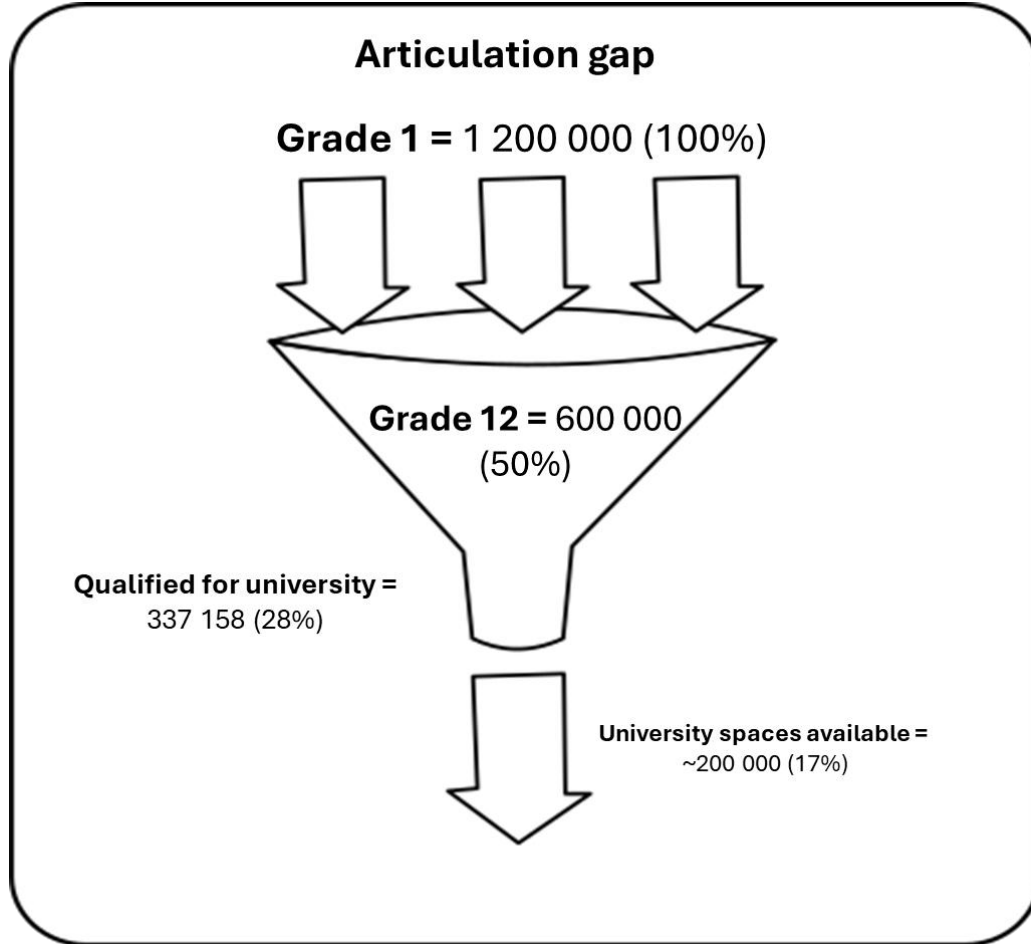
Our Future. Reimagined.

Introduction

- Student retention is critical for institutional sustainability and student success
- Different contexts = different challenges and solutions
- Focus of this research is to obtain practical insights
- Strategic performance indicators at UJ are the module success rates, dropout rates, completion rates, graduate output
- How do student retention interventions at UJ compared to similar UK universities?
- Literature review methodology



School to University



(Source: CHE, Briefly Speaking, October 2017 (Figure redrawn from: Spaul, N (2016), From Matric to and Through University; A Labour Market Intelligence Working Paper)

SA context

- **Historical Inequities:** Legacy of apartheid affecting student preparedness. Expanded access from 495,356 students in 2000 to over 1 million in 2023.
- **Poverty:** Lack of funding, send money home, food insecurity (affects 25.7% of students), transport costs.
- **Digital-divide:** Unequal access to devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy skills. **71%** of current university students are first-generation.
- **Financial Barriers:** High tuition fees, high debt.
- **Geographical Mobility:** Remote/rural areas. Accommodation.
- **Extreme Competition:** Only 26 universities, 15-35:1 application ratios vs UK's 2-6:1.
- **Language barriers:** English as primary medium of instruction marginalizes 91.8% of students who speak other languages at home. Mother-tongue instruction in first year - 23% higher retention rates.

National Performance Data: South Africa

- **Total National UG Enrolment:** Around **850,000–870,000 (≈80%)** (2023)
- **Annual Graduate Output:** 174,823 students
- **National Dropout Rate:** 35% system-wide

Institution Type	Universities	Enrolment Share	Graduation Rate	NSFAS Dependency
Traditional	11	52.4%	35.2%	54%
Universities of Technology	9	31.6%	18.7%	73%
Comprehensive	6	16.0%	24.3%	65%

Student Retention Data: SA vs UK Scale

Metric	United Kingdom	South Africa
Public Universities	~140	26
University Applications	752,025 applicants	~2 million applications
Available Spaces	~500 000	~200,000
Success Rate	79% get first choice	<20% get placed
School Completion	98% complete to age 16	50% complete Grade 12
First-generation students	48%	71%

Definitions

Term	UK	SA
Retention	Year-on-year continuation rate (e.g., % of first-years returning for Year 2). National average: ~ 90–94% .	Not formally published as a national KPI. Retention inferred from dropout rates : ~25–35%.
Graduation / Completion Rate	% of a cohort that finishes within expected time (3–4 years for bachelor's).	This definition = Throughput in SA terms. ~ 30% finish “on time” (regulation 3–4 years). ~ 50–55% finish within 6 years.
Graduation Ratio	Not used. (Closest proxy would be completion rates per cohort.)	Total graduates ÷ Total enrolled headcount (same year)×100 National average: ~ 18–22% .
Throughput	Not a standard UK term — essentially same as completion rate.	Cohort-based measure : % of a starting group that graduates within regulation time (3–4 years) or within 6 years. Much lower than UK rates.



Division for Institutional Planning, Evaluation and Monitoring

[Home](#) » [Teaching and Learning](#) » Division for Institutional Planning, Evaluation and Monitoring

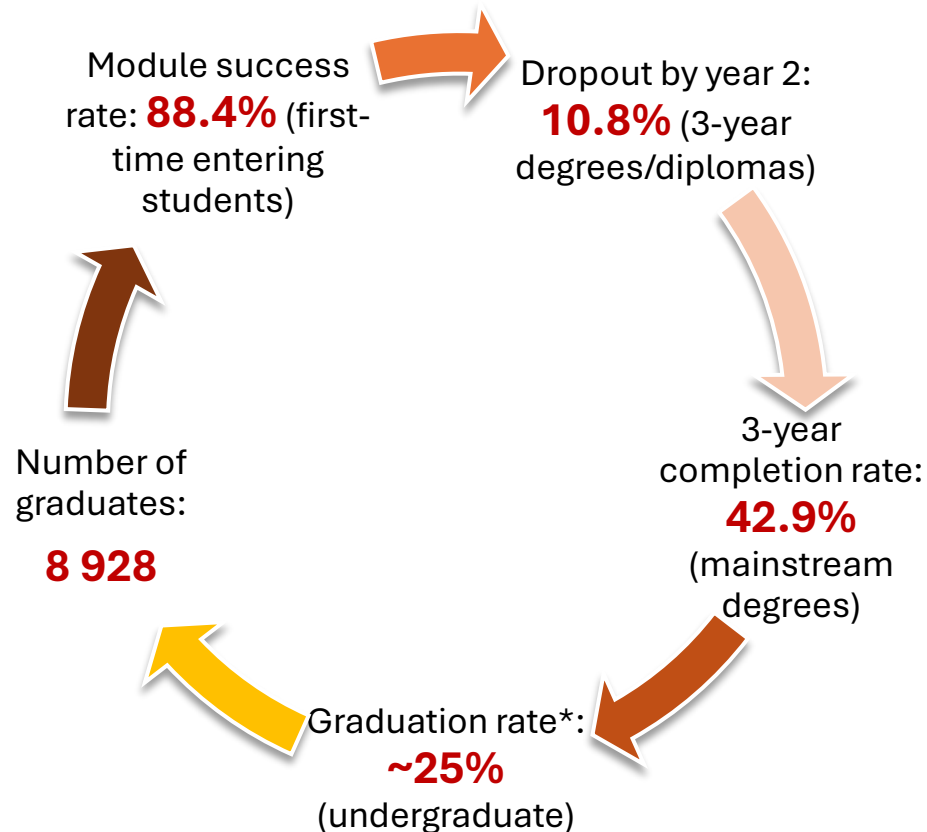


Our Future. Reimagined.



UJ Retention Performance & Current Interventions

Undergraduate 3-year degrees and diplomas Performance Data (2023)



*Graduation rate = Number of graduates/Total enrolment

Key Interventions

- Faculty driven interventions
- **First Year Experience (FYE) & Senior Student Experience (SSE)**
- Integrated Student Success Initiative (ISSI) - data-driven targeting
- Academic Development Centre - extended curricula, skills development
- Early Warning Tracking System (pilot)
- Psychological Services & Career Development (PsyCaD)
- Tutoring @ UJ
- NSFAS collaboration + internal bursaries
- **Cancellation process**
- UJ 101 module content

National Performance Data: UK

UK University Retention

- **Total Enrollment:** **2.9 million** students across UK universities
- **First-Year Continuation:** 90.2% system average
- **Qualifications Awarded:** 1.05 million (465,240 first degrees)
- **Age:** Young students 92.3% vs Mature 51+ only 81.4%

Primary Withdrawal Factors

- **Mental Health Concerns:** 29% of withdrawal considerations
- **Financial Pressures:** £504 monthly shortfall (costs £1,104, loans £600)
- **Part-time Work Impact:** 55% work (first time majority), 44% report academic harm

UK University Retention Interventions

RETENTION RATES

Birmingham 98%

UCL 98%

Edinburg 96%

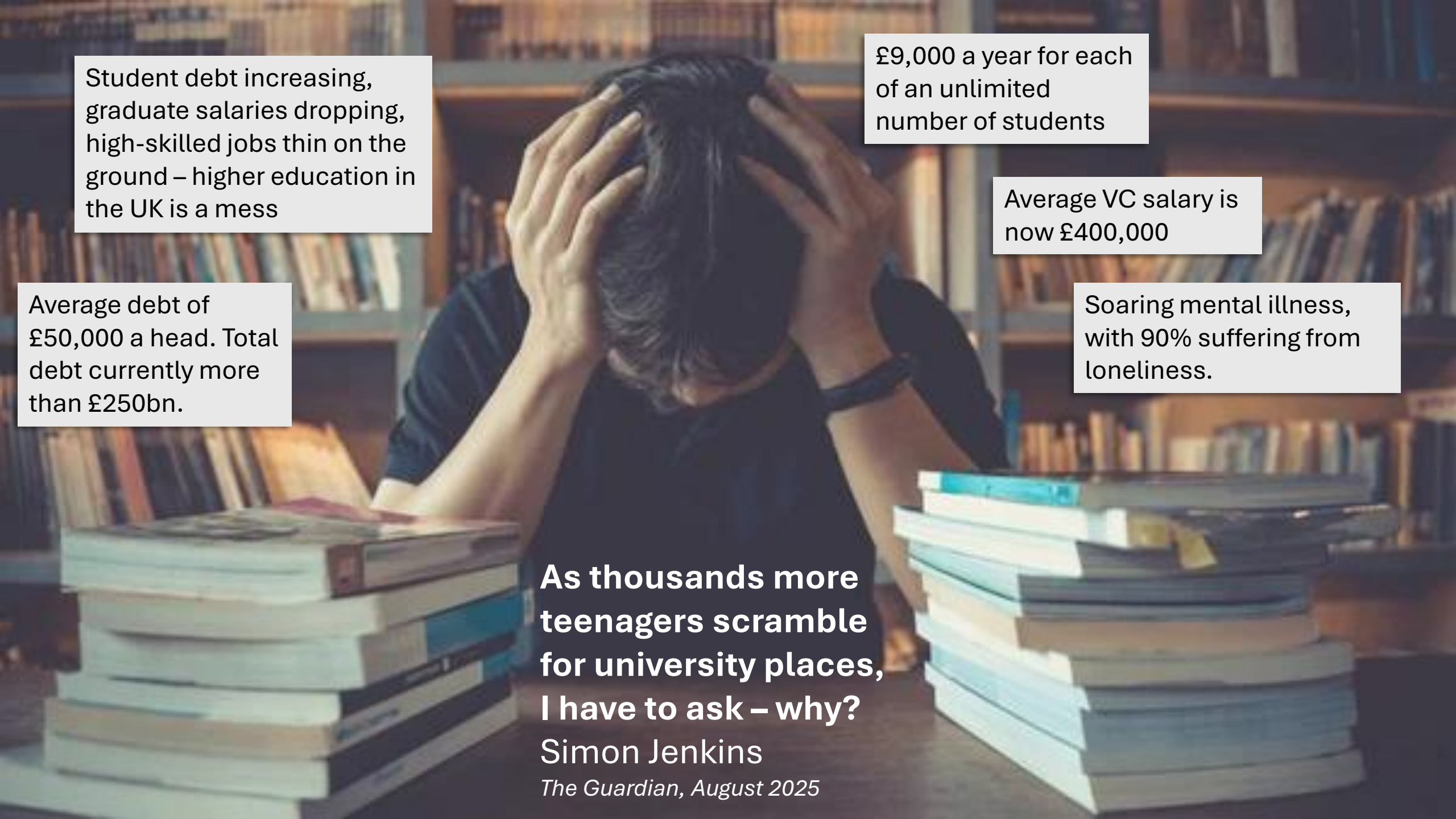
UCD (Ireland) 95%

TCD (Ireland) ~ 90%

Manchester ~ 90%

Common Interventions

- Comprehensive early warning systems (e.g., Starfish software at Manchester)
- Personal Academic Tutoring (PAT) systems
- **Extensive financial support (bursaries, emergency funds)**
- Student Success Offices (UCL, Manchester)
- Peer & faculty mentoring programs
- Academic skills centres
- Data analytics for at-risk identification
- **Attendance monitoring systems (Dublin Institute of Technology doubled retention by intervening after 3 missed classes)**
- Regular one-to-one meetings for academic progress and personal development support
- **Emergency grants that increase graduation rates by 134% when readily accessible**
- Micro-grants for unexpected expenses (laptop replacement, etc.)
- **24/7 tutoring access across 250+ subjects**

A person with dark hair, wearing a dark t-shirt, is sitting at a desk in a library. They have their head buried in their hands, suggesting stress or despair. In front of them are two large stacks of books. The background shows bookshelves filled with books.

Student debt increasing,
graduate salaries dropping,
high-skilled jobs thin on the
ground – higher education in
the UK is a mess

£9,000 a year for each
of an unlimited
number of students

Average VC salary is
now £400,000

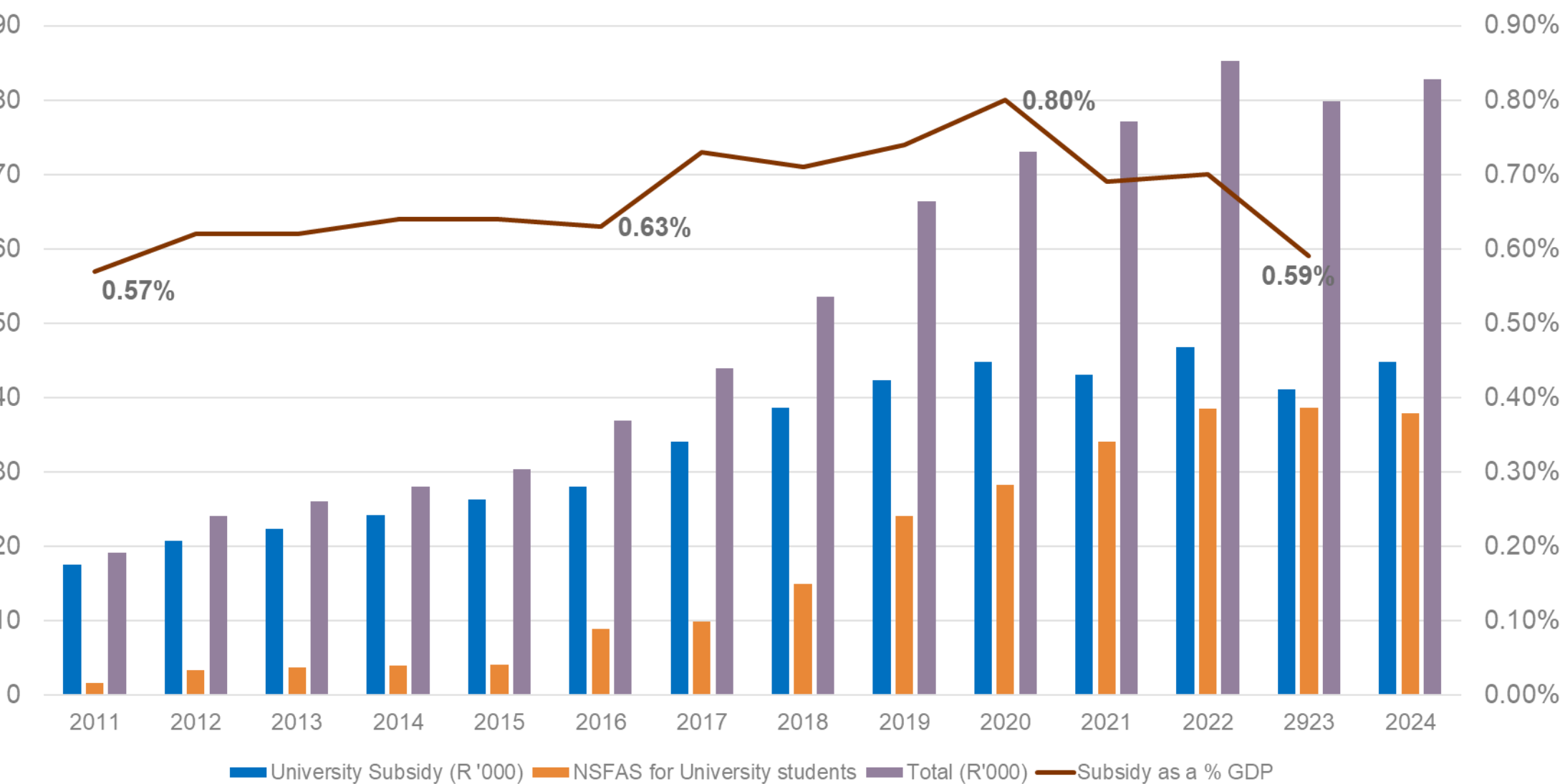
Average debt of
£50,000 a head. Total
debt currently more
than £250bn.

Soaring mental illness,
with 90% suffering from
loneliness.

**As thousands more
teenagers scramble
for university places,
I have to ask – why?**
Simon Jenkins

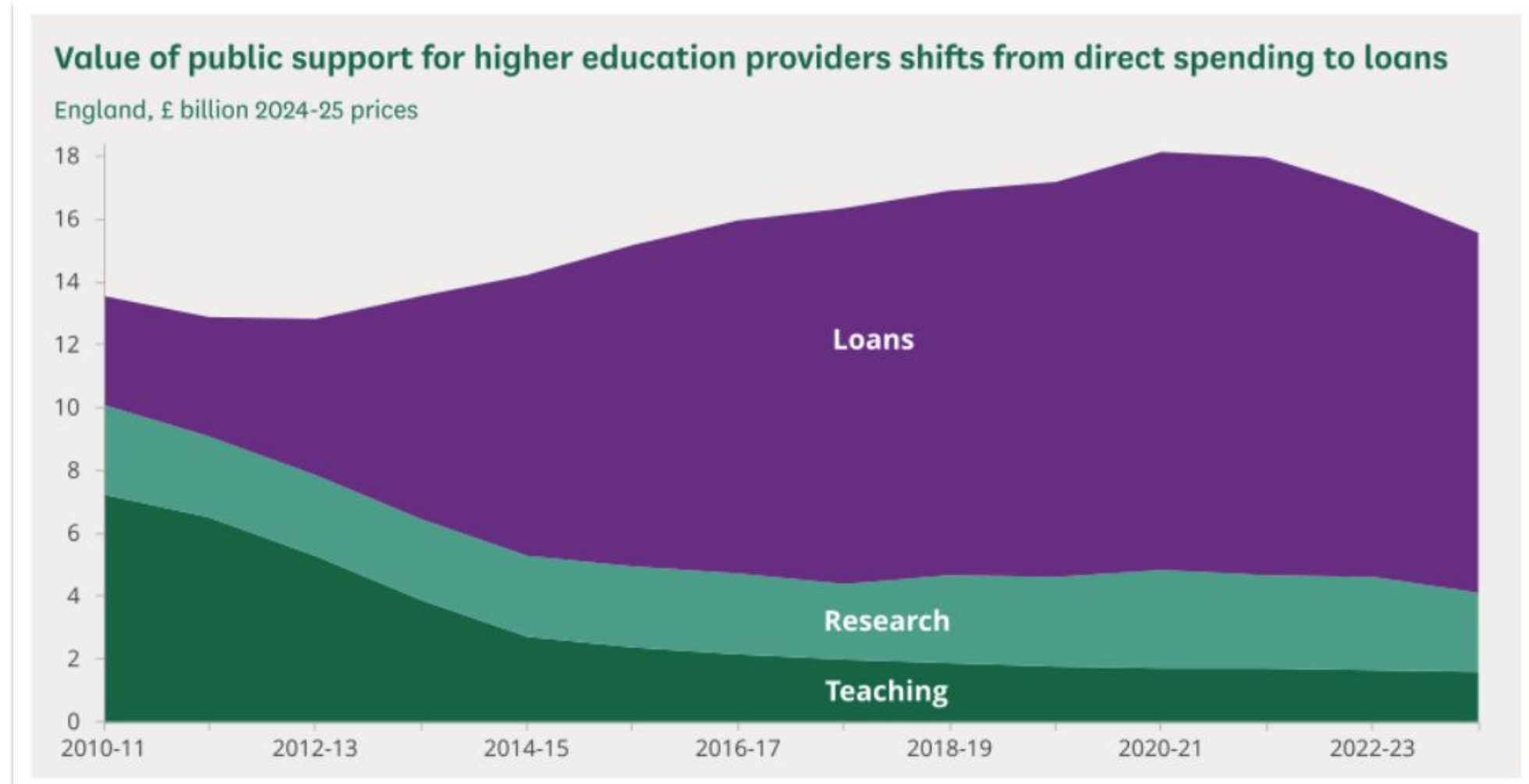
The Guardian, August 2025

Nominal growth in funding for Universities and Students (2011 - 2023)



Data source: University State Budgets – Public Report; DHET March 2023

UK Financial support to students



Comparative Analysis

UK Strengths → What UJ Can Learn?

- Systematic early warning across all faculties → dropout reduction
- Comprehensive mentoring
- Enhanced financial literacy programs → 134% graduation increase with emergency grants
- Robust evaluation mechanisms → Evidence-based continuous improvement
- Attendance monitoring for lectures
- Emergency grants

Lessons for Practice

For Under-Resourced Systems (SA Context)

**Adopt data-driven
targeting**

**Develop culturally
responsive
interventions**

**Create comprehensive
first-year programs**

**Build systematic early
warning systems**

**Leverage mobile-first
technology**

WhatsApp learning
platforms and cost-
effective solutions

Questions for Further Research

Critical Questions

- How do we balance **access expansion** with **quality maintenance** in developing systems?
- How do we **measure intervention effectiveness** across different contexts?
- What are the **minimum viable retention systems** for resource-constrained environments?
- How can **culturally responsive interventions** be systematically developed and evaluated?

Thank you, for your attention.
nmaistry@uj.ac.za

