

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

Higher Education Institutional Research (HEIR)

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20 YEARS
2005-2025

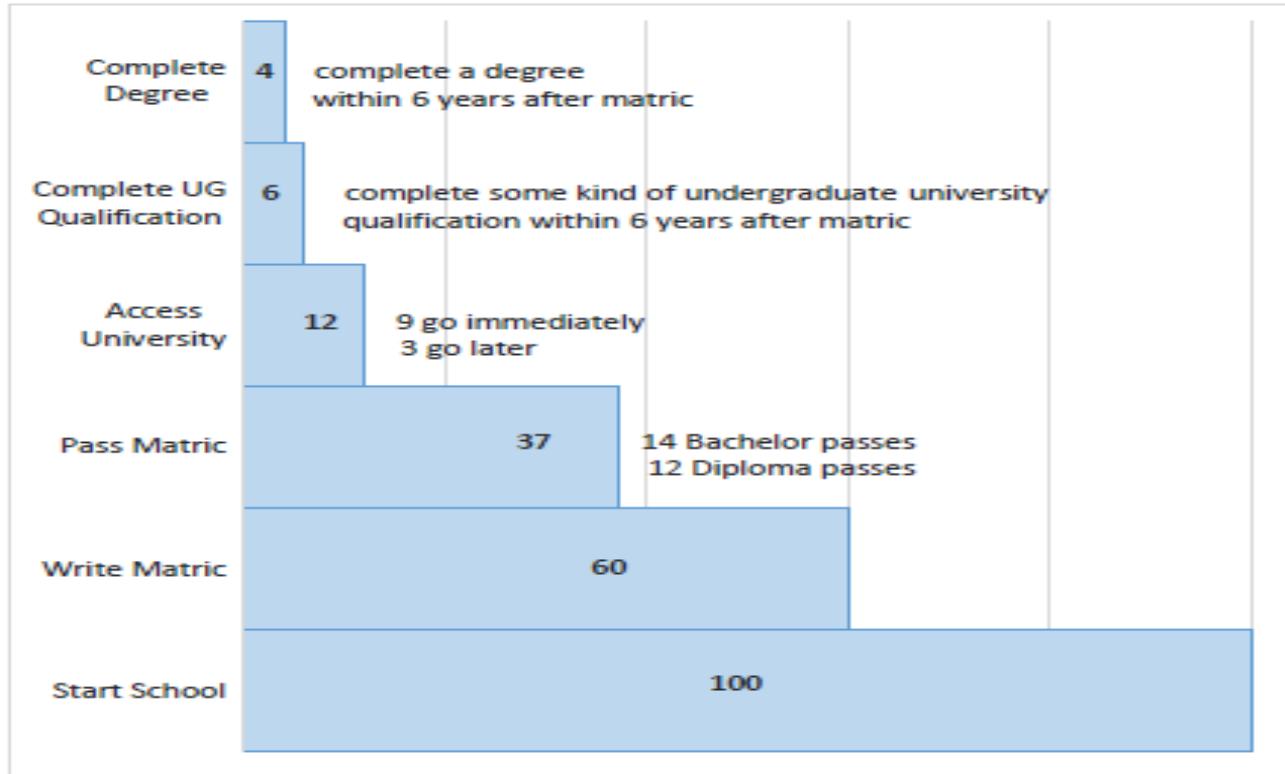
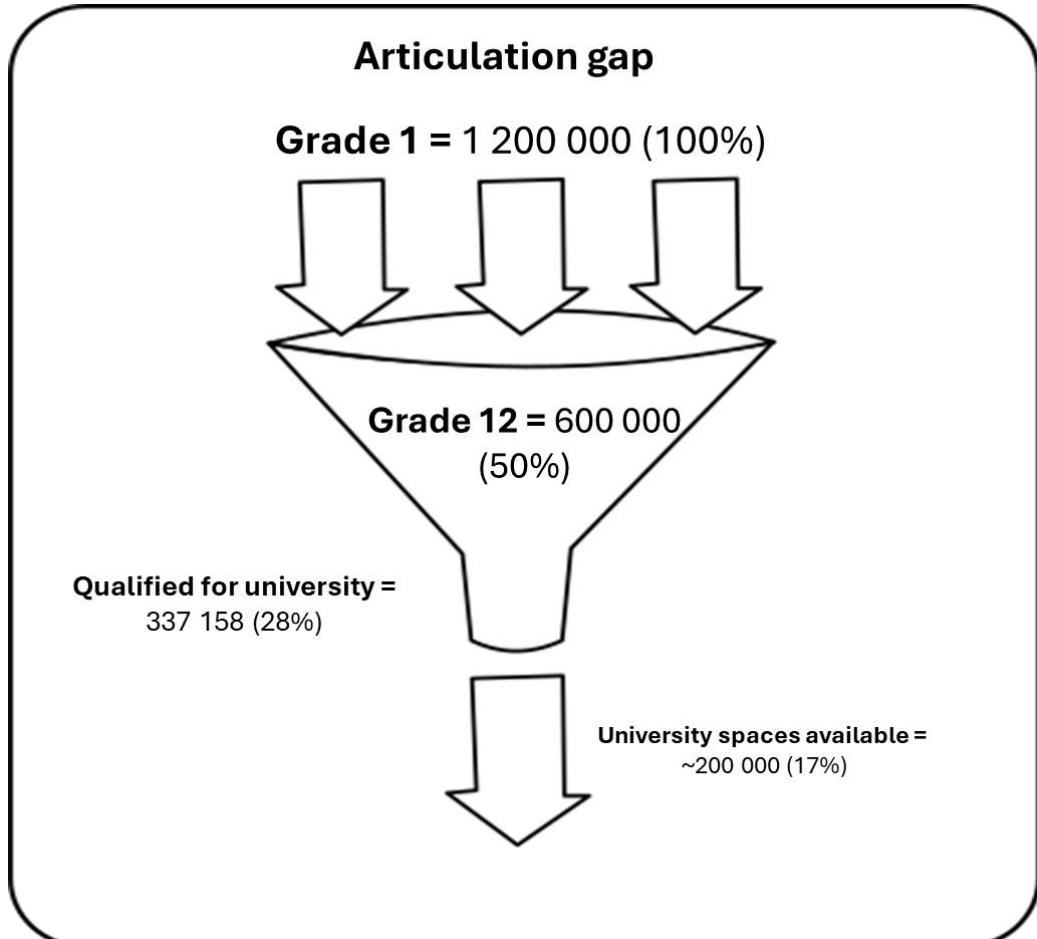
Our Future. Reimagined.

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: Spaull, 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

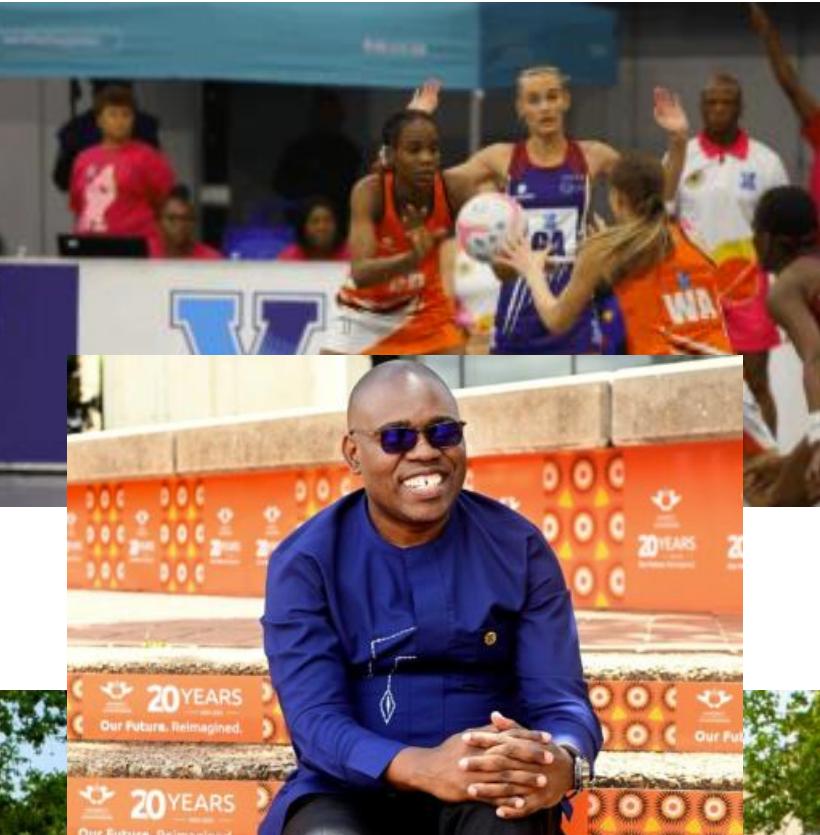
Institution Type	Universities	Enrolment Share	Graduation Rate	NSFAS Dependency
Traditional	11	52.4%	35.2%	54%
Universities of Technology	9	31.6%	18.7%	73%
Comprehensive	6	16.0%	24.3%	65%

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.



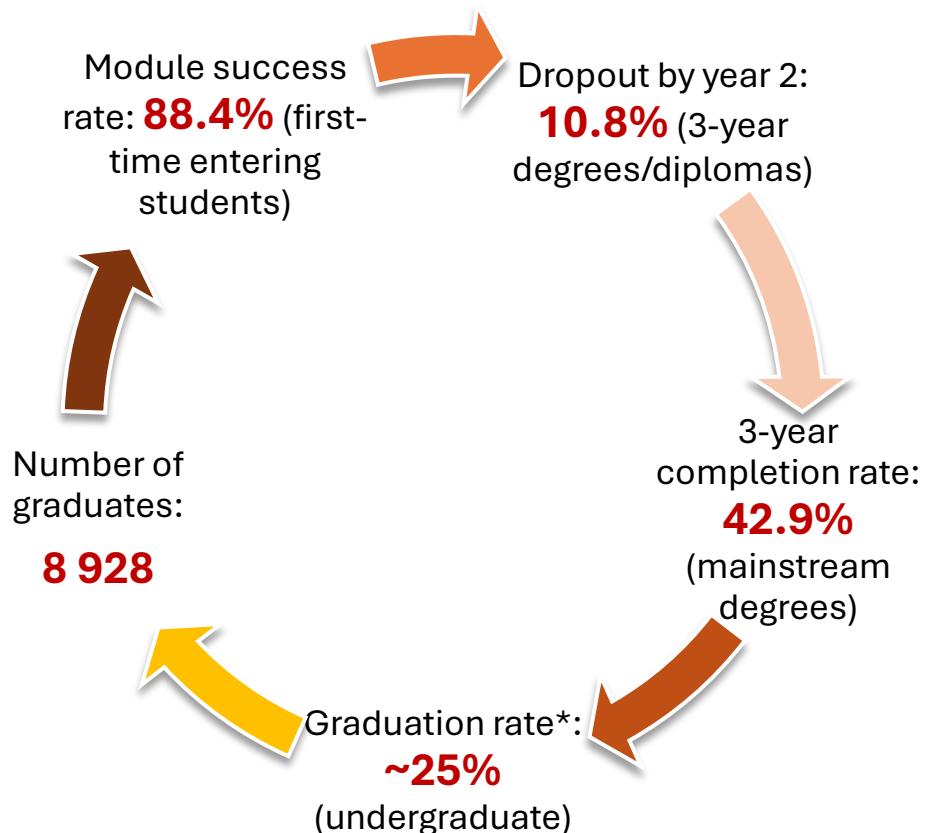
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UJ Retention Performance & Current Interventions

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



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

*Graduation rate = Number of graduates/Total enrolment

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%

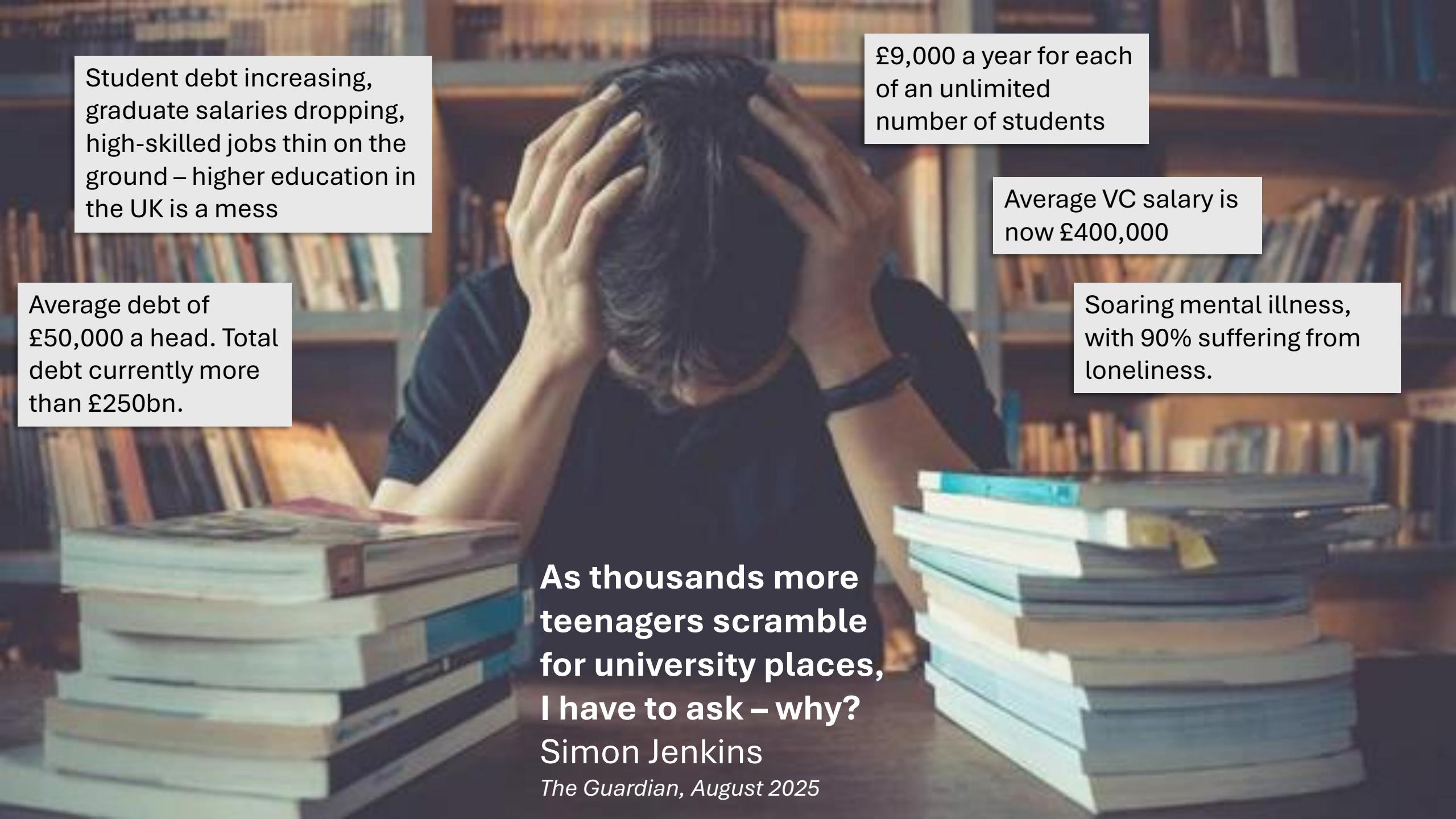
UCD (Ireland) 95%

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**



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

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

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

Average VC salary is
now £400,000

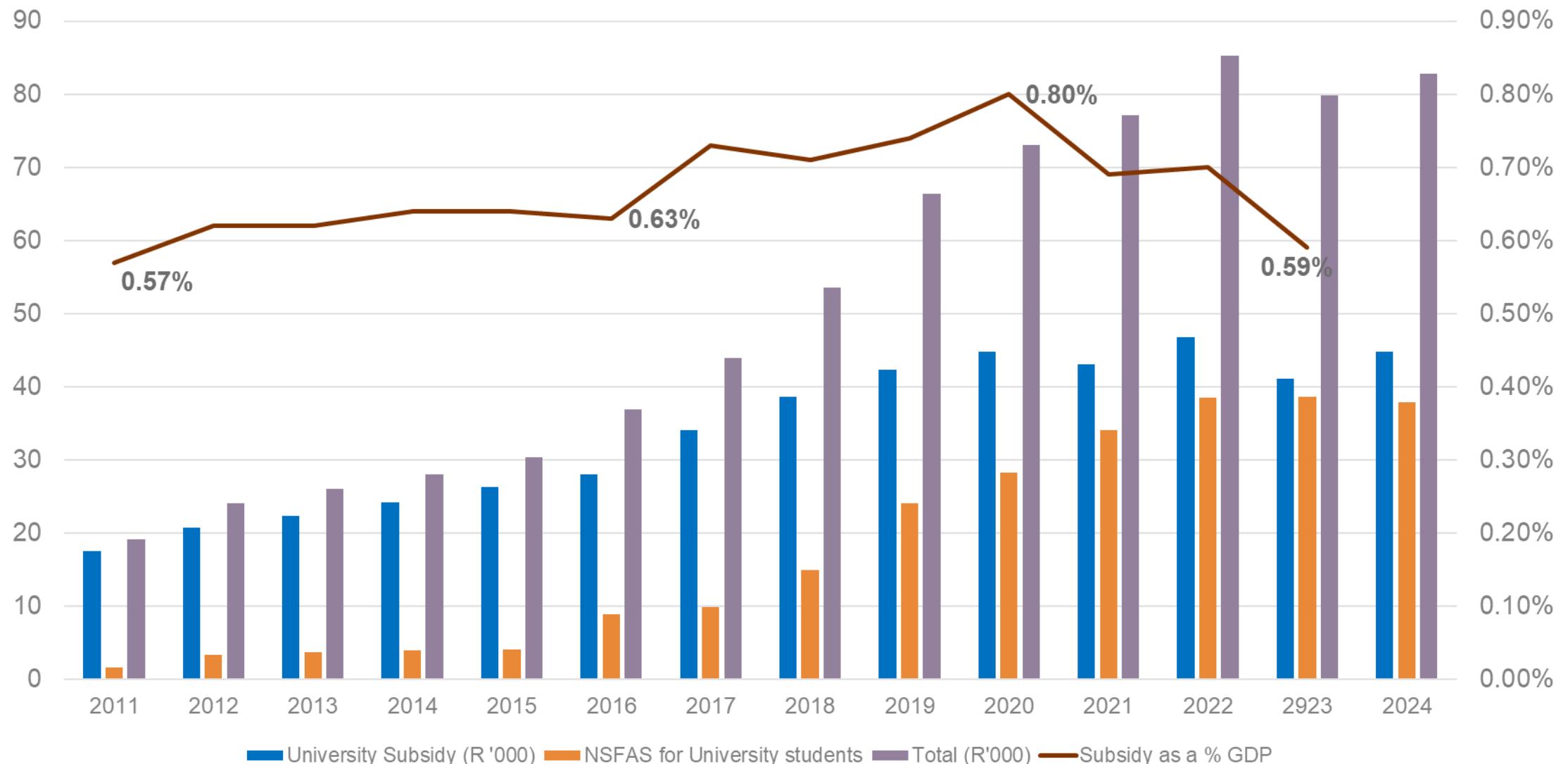
Soaring mental illness,
with 90% suffering from
loneliness.

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

Simon Jenkins

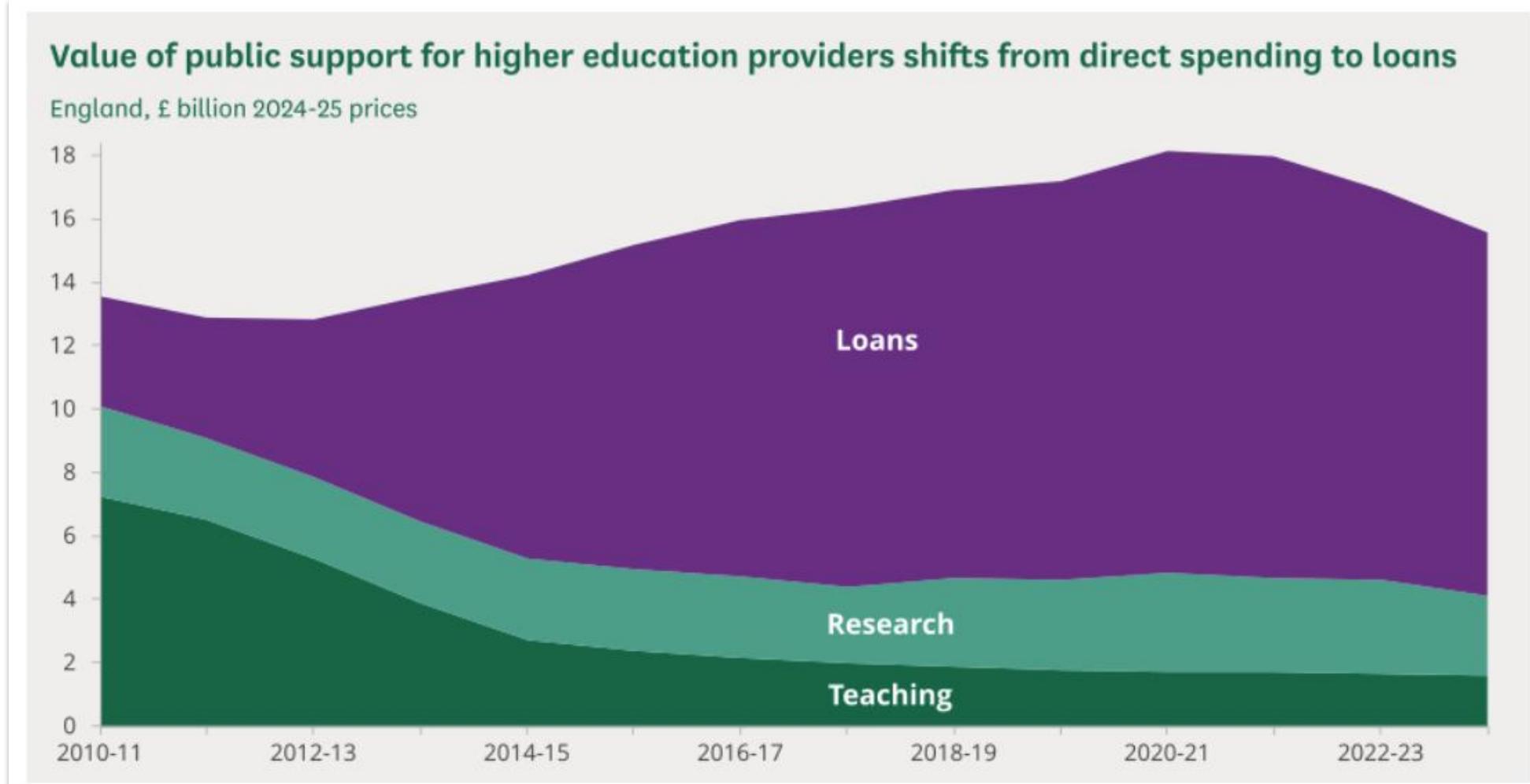
The Guardian, August 2025

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.
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