University of Newcastle
Response to
Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education

The University of Newcastle welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the discussion paper and would be pleased to continue to participate in consultation around future reform in Higher Education policy and funding arrangements.

We recognize the Government’s desire to provide a sustainable basis for university funding. Underpinning our response, however, is the principle that any changes to Higher Education policy or funding models should not inadvertently disadvantage research-intensive regional universities in relation to either long-term structural or operating arrangements or by constraining access to the resources necessary to support research, student participation and infrastructure.

Summary of UON Recommendations Arising from the Discussion Paper

1. UON recommends that Commonwealth funding be extended to enabling (foundation studies) programs AND sub-bachelor qualifications offered by Australian universities, with places either assigned by the Commonwealth or demand driven depending on demonstrated need and the outcomes of such programs.

2. UON supports an elevated-cap on student contributions for up to 20% of a university’s equivalent full time load (EFTSL) in Flagship Programs in order to stimulate diversity and choice and drive innovation.

3. UON recommends directing HEPP funding to universities that have achieved low-SES participation rates in the upper two quartiles, and using a formula that recognizes both the proportion of low-SES students (and other relevant groups such as Indigenous students) and the attainment of successful outcomes for those students.

4. UON recommends that in order to make significant inroads to address the limitations of online undergraduate education and leverage its advantages for part-time students in underrepresented groups, a Commonwealth Digital Learning Innovation Fund be created to support universities addressing the particular needs of online students and to improve outcomes.

5. UON supports a review of postgraduate coursework funding, and a systematic approach to reallocation of Commonwealth funded postgraduate places to address the historical inconsistencies and to provide an equitable pathway for students to continue their studies, particularly in areas identified as national priorities.

6. UON supports the creation of funding mechanisms that ensure high quality physical and virtual infrastructure can be developed and maintained by regional universities to drive innovation and skills development.

7. UON recommends that the government consider a “value added” measure similar to that proposed for the UK Teaching Excellence Framework, which recognizes the effort in addressing differential performance in equity measures versus excellence measures, and assigns funding to ensure that institutional commitments to both equity and excellence are rewarded.

8. UON recommends that further consideration be given to the implications of affordability and the possible consequences of student contribution increases on priority areas and on under represented student groups.
9. **Proposals to increase the loan fee for undergraduate and sub-bachelor students are not desirable since the income benefits are not yet derived, particularly in traditionally underrepresented groups, and up-front or increased establishment fees may act as an unintended disincentive to study or may simply add to accumulated FEE-HELP debt.**
About the University of Newcastle

UON is a research-intensive university located in regional Australia. More than 39,000 students study at the University annually. Its principal campuses are in the Hunter and Central Coast of NSW, and the University also delivers programs in the Mid-North Coast, across regional NSW, via a Sydney presence, and at its Singapore campus. The University also supports wider communities through a range of online postgraduate education offered through our Gradschool.com.

UON is ranked in the top 10 in Australia for research income and the top 8 in Australia for research rated at well above world standard by the 2015 Excellence in Research for Australia evaluation. The University is in the top 10 in Australia for the quality of its teaching as measured by the University Experience Survey.

Founded in 1965, the University is committed to excellence and equity. During its first half-century, the University has developed into a leading centre for research and education in engineering, health and medicine, and energy and resources, with emerging strengths in a range of areas including social sciences and creative disciplines. Many of our students come from areas of social and educational disadvantage and in addition to creating world leading areas of expertise to support industry and business growth, UON has engaged vigorously in the widening participation agenda to begin to redress the low attainment levels that also hamper productivity and economic growth. UON’s achievements in this area include:

- In 2016 UON’s Indigenous student numbers exceeded 1000 enrolments for the first time, and in 2015 UON recorded the largest number of Indigenous students (by both enrolments and EFTSL) at any Australian university,
- In 2015, 24.9% of UON undergraduate enrolments were from low-SES backgrounds, the sixth largest proportion of low-SES students in an Australian university.

This focus on excellence and equity requires a long term commitment to have an impact. It is critical in the next decade that Australia’s regions, including those served by UON, are not deprived of the capacity to drive innovation. The provision of the full range of education opportunities to a diverse population will ensure that the skills for economic transformation and social cohesion are available within those regions. In addition, as a research-intensive university, there is a nexus between the funding arrangements, the human and other resources to maintain high quality teaching and the contingent provision of research capacity to support future economic growth in the region. Any future higher education policy must take full account of the broad return on investment both to individuals and to the public good across education and research.

In summary, UON is a significant contributor to both education and research in regional NSW, and is responding to the Discussion Paper in the context of our unique mission to enhance educational attainment and support economic prosperity in the region we serve. Further data relating to the context in which UON operates are provided in Appendix A.
Opportunity and Choice

UON supports a full range of options for study being available to students at Australian universities. The options available to study, pathways and graduate outcomes should be informed by robust information that allows informed choices. Such information may include:

- Graduate outcomes, including employment rates,
- Teaching performance, including student satisfaction and good teaching scores,
- Costs and duration of study,
- Entry requirements and the success rates associated with each entry pathway.

UON has a long history of providing access to higher education for students from a wide range of educational and demographic backgrounds. Our commitment to supporting students with diverse backgrounds is demonstrated through the success rates in undergraduate courses associated with the different entry pathways we support (identified for different cohorts in Figure 1 by the basis of admission).

Figure 1 shows cohorts from enabling (non-award foundation studies) as well as VET Awards (sub bachelor programs), and also includes those transferring from another course of higher education study or admitted with an existing professional qualification.

On the basis that comparable success rates can be achieved for different pathways, demonstrating the impact of adequate preparation and support, UON recommends that Commonwealth funding be extended to enabling (foundation studies) programs AND sub-bachelor qualifications offered by Australian universities, with places either assigned by the Commonwealth or demand driven depending on demonstrated need and the outcomes of such programs.

A possible model for funding is shown in Figure 2, where the principle of open access has been retained for enabling (foundation studies), which are offered at no cost to students and without restrictions on admission, and funding for sub-bachelor qualifications at AQF 5 and AQF 6 with specified admission requirements shared between government and the student.
UON also supports an elevated-cap on student contributions for up to 20% of a university’s equivalent full time load (EFTSL) in Flagship Programs in order to stimulate diversity and choice and drive innovation.

Courses eligible for the elevated cap would be linked to priority areas, and may include STEM disciplines and/or courses which have significant content supporting graduate outcomes in areas such as entrepreneurship and innovation. Flagship courses would ensure that universities are encouraged to admit students to areas aligned with strategic priorities and demonstrated excellence. Both the percentage of EFTSL, and the level of the elevated-cap, would be linked to outcomes agreed through a consultation process.

Fairness and Equity

The principle that the Australian Higher Education sector should “ensure equity of access regardless of personal or economic circumstances and reduce barriers for under-represented groups” is particularly relevant for regional Australia where low attainment rates are linked with lower economic productivity and household incomes as in Appendix A. While the demand driven system has allowed participation rates to increase in regional Australia, the gap in attainment still remains an equity issue.

The HEPP programme has been a critical component for UON to support students from under-represented groups to achieve success. Success rates for UON’s undergraduate cohorts by various demographic and socio-economic groups are shown in Figure 3, demonstrating that comparable outcomes can be achieved by targeting support to relevant areas.
Figure 3: UON’s undergraduate success rates by student background.

An outline of UON’s approach to the allocation of HEPP funding is provided in Appendix B, and shows coverage of a range of relevant areas that have impacted positively on participation and success rates.

While UON supports the review of HEPP, we advocate strongly for the retention of the programme where successful outcomes are demonstrated. To this end we would also support directing HEPP funding to universities who have achieved low-SES participation rates in the upper two quartiles, and using a formula that recognizes both the proportion of low-SES students (and other relevant groups such as Indigenous students) and the attainment of successful outcomes for those students.

A key factor associated with raising participation among underrepresented groups is a lack of flexibility in traditional modes of delivery. Significant increases in part-time study, coupled with the demands of employment particularly impacting low-SES students have led to an increase in demand for flexible and online modes of delivery. Evidence from the increase in “direct” admissions to university (i.e. admissions, largely from non current school leavers managed outside the Tertiary Admission Centres) suggests that this area is growing at a comparatively higher rate across the sector, with approximately one third of admissions now in this category. Enrolments in online courses, while offering flexibility of study, are also characterized by relatively higher rates of attrition.

UON recommends that in order to make significant inroads to address the limitations of online undergraduate education and leverage its advantages for part-time students in underrepresented groups, a Commonwealth Digital Learning Innovation Fund be created to support universities addressing the particular needs of online students and to improve outcomes. Such a fund would be allocated based on improvements that demonstrably deliver parity of retention rates for online and on campus students, and take account of the proportion of students completing online programs rather than online taught load.

While HEPP and other strategies have assisted in addressing inequity at undergraduate level, little attention has been paid to inequities associated with postgraduate coursework education. In regions undergoing economic transformation, new industries will require advanced skills in line with the trends identified in the 2015 CEDA report on Australia’s Future Workforce. However, the acknowledged historical legacy of allocating Commonwealth places for postgraduate courses results in significant inconsistencies in
subsidies available to students across the sector and across regions. **UON would strongly support a review of postgraduate coursework funding, and a systematic approach to reallocation of Commonwealth funded postgraduate places to address the historical inconsistencies and provide an equitable pathway for students to continue their studies in areas identified as national priorities.**

As a research-intensive regional university, UON is committed to ensuring that we provide both equitable access to high quality higher education as well as to the human and infrastructure assets associated with the research capacity and excellence necessary to support economic growth and the long-term sustainability of our communities. Proposals to support the continuing development of contemporary and relevant physical and virtual infrastructure for both research and teaching are welcome in order to ensure that the businesses and industries in regional Australia, including those areas such as Newcastle and the Central Coast, continue to have the benefit of a globally competitive research-intensive regional university. **UON supports the creation of funding mechanisms that ensure high quality physical and virtual infrastructure can be developed and maintained by regional universities to drive innovation and skills development.**

**Excellence and Quality**

Excellence in research and a commitment to quality education for a diverse range of students are not mutually exclusive. As a research intensive regional university with achievements in both education and research, UON stands firm that the Australian higher education sector should remain an “open market for excellence”, with institutions (particularly younger institutions) not constrained by funding models from growing both teaching and research where they are able to demonstrate excellence. However, it is clear that few universities have performed well in both research excellence and the delivery of education outcomes for under represented groups. Analysis of the performance of universities in achieving ERA “5” ratings (well above world standard) and serving low-SES populations shows that there is room for improvement in this area. Figure 4 demonstrates the discrepancies that exist between universities achieving well in research excellence and those achieving well in tackling participation rates by low SES students.

![2015 ERA RESULTS AGAINST LOW SES %](image)

**Figure 4:** Number of ERA “5” ratings (2015) vs. Percentage of low SES students (2014)  
(UON is shown in Red)
UON recommends that the government consider a “value added” measure similar to that proposed for the UK Teaching Excellence Framework, which recognizes the effort in addressing differential performance in equity measures versus excellence measures, and assigns some funding to ensure that institutional commitments to both equity and excellence are rewarded. UON also supports the continued emphasis on transparency of information to ensure that students have available the most appropriate information to assess which course is most suitable for their needs, the quality measures associated with courses (particularly those focusing on graduate outcomes) and the requirements and pathways by which they can be admitted to those courses. Continued refinement of the information available in the QILT would be augmented by information associated with the “value added” – demonstrated by a clearer understanding of factors such as retention rates, success rates and the impact of investments made to support students from different backgrounds.

Affordability

UON recognizes the need to ensure the long-term affordability of higher education while remaining committed to the principles of the demand driven system. It is not convinced of the benefits of the proposed reductions in Commonwealth funding. With government investment in higher education as a proportion of GDP among the lowest in the OECD, and the need to invest in economic transition through higher level skills driving policies including the NISA, the potential impact of reductions in government funding needs more detailed evaluation. Factors that need to be taken into account in determining the affordability of higher education to both government and students include:

- The implications identified in the PBO report of shorter term savings in government spending caused by reductions in the CGS component being offset by longer term increases in the cost of the income contingent loan schemes.
- The potential impact on student choices caused by rebalancing the government and student contributions as a result of any reduction in government funding.

In the case of rebalancing the government and student contributions so that, on average, government funds 50% of the cost of higher education there are potentially significant implications for some disciplines. UON estimates that this approach would yield a 12.3% reduction in government funding, however student contributions would rise by up to 30%, with notable increases in priority areas such as science and engineering potentially leading to unintended consequences in demand for these areas.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Student Contribution</th>
<th>Government Contribution</th>
<th>Total Funding</th>
<th>Student Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law, accounting</td>
<td>$10,685</td>
<td>$1,749</td>
<td>$12,434</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>$6,936</td>
<td>$4,859</td>
<td>$11,795</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics, computing, built environment</td>
<td>$10,119</td>
<td>$8,598</td>
<td>$18,717</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural science, Social studies</td>
<td>$7,458</td>
<td>$8,598</td>
<td>$16,056</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>$7,507</td>
<td>$8,945</td>
<td>$16,452</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical Psych., Languages, Visual/Perf. Arts</td>
<td>$7,735</td>
<td>$10,574</td>
<td>$18,309</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied Health</td>
<td>$10,396</td>
<td>$10,574</td>
<td>$20,970</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>$7,907</td>
<td>$11,805</td>
<td>$19,712</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering, Science</td>
<td>$11,020</td>
<td>$15,033</td>
<td>$26,053</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine, Dentistry</td>
<td>$13,108</td>
<td>$19,080</td>
<td>$32,188</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>$11,585</td>
<td>$19,080</td>
<td>$30,665</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Cluster Rates arising from equal average government and student contributions.

**UON recommends that further consideration be given to the implications of affordability and the possible consequences of student contribution increases on priority areas and on under represented student groups.**

The HECS-HELP is a central pillar of Australia’s Higher Education system and an enabler of participation. Affordability of Higher Education to students from diverse backgrounds is a key principle of the demand driven system, and must be preserved in any future arrangements.

Under the current arrangements the cost of servicing the loan is differently offset by loan fee arrangements across the three loan categories. Proposals to increase the loan fee for undergraduate and sub-bachelor students are not desirable since the income benefits are not yet derived, particularly in traditionally underrepresented groups, and up-front or increased establishment fees may act as an unintended disincentive to study or may simply add to accumulated FEE-HELP debt.
Appendix A: UON’s Experience in Driving Access and Success

Higher Education attainment rates in regional Australia remain significantly below those of the metropolitan population. This is evident from Figure A1 for the Hunter and Central Coast regions served by UON. The difference is significant at both bachelor and postgraduate level. These levels of attainment will hinder the region’s future economic growth, especially at a time of transition where many jobs in traditionally strong sectors of the economy will be replaced by automation and computing.

The relatively low attainment rates impact economic and social factors in the region. Median household incomes correlate strongly with attainment rates, as indicated in Figure A2, and this effect can be seen more widely across regional Australia in Figure A3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Median Total Household Income (Weekly)</th>
<th>Percentage Of People With Bachelors Degree Or Higher Qualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newcastle and Lake Macquarie</td>
<td>$1,133</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter Valley (excl. Newcastle/LM)</td>
<td>$1,158</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Coast</td>
<td>$1,003</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>$1,237</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>$1,237</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Sydney</td>
<td>$1,447</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table A3: Difference between average incomes in regional and metropolitan Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Wage earners as % of Aus total</th>
<th>Wages as % of Aus total</th>
<th>Average income</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW – Greater Sydney</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>$57,612</td>
<td>$11,098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW – Rest of NSW</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>$46,514</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria – Melbourne</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>$52,470</td>
<td>$9,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria – Rest of VIC</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>$43,072</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland – Brisbane</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>$52,171</td>
<td>$4,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland – Rest of QLD</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>$47,571</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT (nation’s highest wage avg. state/territory)</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>$60,987</td>
<td>$17,466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania (nation’s lowest wage avg. state/territory)</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>$43,521</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure A3: Difference between average incomes in regional and metropolitan Australia**

The median total household income in the regions served by UON is also reflected in the fact that UON has 24.9% of its undergraduate student population from areas categorized as low-SES. This percentage is the sixth highest proportion at any Australian university, and will also be a factor in the capacity of students to pay, or consider paying, any increased student contribution irrespective of whether an income contingent loan is available through the HELP scheme.

Evidence that participation rates need improving is also apparent in the figures for Gross Regional Product (GRP). As demonstrated in Figure A4, per capital GRP is lower than the NSW average for both the Hunter and Central Coast regions, mirroring the attainment rates and other economic indicators in these regions.

### Table A4: Per Capita Gross Regional Product by region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>GRP</th>
<th>Per capita GRP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Coast</td>
<td>317,517</td>
<td>$11.8b</td>
<td>$37,163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter (inc. Newcastle)</td>
<td>620,530</td>
<td>$38.5b</td>
<td>$62,044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>6,917,656</td>
<td>$513.3b</td>
<td>$74,201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure A4: Per Capita Gross Regional Product by region**

In this context UON is a significant economic and social contributor to its regions. Independent modeling by the Hunter Research Foundation showed that the University is expected to contribute $5.5b to the Hunter economy in the next decade (including $1.3b from the Newcastle CBD campus development). An additional $1.3b is projected from activities on the Central Coast. Aside from the opportunity cost that might be caused if the Higher Education reforms significantly impact participation rates, and the flow on effects to research productivity as a driver of innovation, the realization of these direct benefits to the regional economy will also likely be impacted.
Appendix B: UON’s HEPP Strategy

UON supports the current review of HEPP and in particular an evaluation of the outcomes that have been achieved by the application of HEPP funding to improve access to higher education, raise aspirations and support student success. Areas that UON has targeted with HEPP investment are:

1. Scholarship support for low-SES students
2. Research to build an evidence base to support strategies for improving access and success for low-SES, Indigenous and other under represented student groups
3. Transition and retention strategies to provide student support
4. Outreach projects to build aspiration and preparation for university study among under represented student groups in disadvantaged schools.

In this context, UON remains passionately committed to ensuring our communities are able to access university study. The University has, for more than 50 years, championed equity and excellence, and our track record in enrolling students from all walks of life – and supporting their success in their studies – defines our institution: proudly helping all parts of our regions through the economic transition which Australia is confronting. For example:

- 24.9% of UON’s undergraduate enrolments in 2015 were from low SES backgrounds.
- UON’s undergraduate retention rates for students from low-SES backgrounds are comparable to students from backgrounds: 83.2% compared with 84.2% in 2014.
- At 85.9% in 2015, success rates for students from low-SES backgrounds are comparable to the 87.1% achieved across the cohort overall.
- The number of students from a low SES background completing an undergraduate program has increased from 726 in 2011 (or 22.4% of all completions) to 855 in 2015 (or 23.0% of all completions).

(Source: UON MIS and UON analysis).

UON is also the nation’s leader in enrolling Indigenous students, the legacy of over 30 years of hard work and outstanding engagement by the University’s Wollotuka Institute. For example:

- In 2015, UON enrolled 914 Indigenous students, the largest number of any Australian university and in 2016 Indigenous student enrolments have exceeded 1000 for the first time.
- The average success rate for undergraduate Indigenous students was 81.1% in 2015.
- Retention rates for UON’s undergraduate Indigenous students are within 2.5 percentage points of the cohort average, and the gap has narrowed considerably from 2011, when it was 5.1 points.
- The number of Indigenous students completing an undergraduate program each year has increased from 54 in 2011 (or 1.7% of all completions) to 82 in 2015 (or 2.2% of all completions).

(Source: UON MIS and UON analysis).
UON is an institution that has worked tirelessly to ensure our communities are able to benefit from access to a world-class university. UON is ranked within the world’s top 300 (THE and QS 2015), and in Australia’s top eight for the amount of research that is well above world standard (ERA 2015). Few Australian universities have been able to combine the delivery of outstanding education, research and innovation outcomes with the scale of UON’s success in widening access and partnering it with success. Although the University has always engaged with our community, a key element of our recent success has been the investment provided by the Commonwealth through HEPP.

The remarkable impact of HEPP

HEPP funding has allowed the University to invest in outreach programs that have built aspiration and engagement in communities where higher education participation has historically been low, and to create sustainable and supportive pathways into university and through to graduation for students from disadvantaged communities. HEPP investment will be essential if the University is to maintain these critical, resource-intensive activities.

Outreach activities are vital in building participation in communities with historically low university participation. In 2015, AIM High worked with 10,038 young people in partnership with 62 schools across the Hunter, Central Coast and Mid North Coast. These schools were identified because of their characteristics, including a higher than average percentage of families in the bottom quartile of socioeconomic disadvantage, and low levels of student transition to University. The program uses innovative approaches to demonstrate the links between students’ lived experiences, classroom learning, and career and study options.

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The program has delivered excellent outcomes: Low SES commencing undergraduate enrolments from schools participating in the AIM HIGH program have increased by 83.8% since 2010. The increase in low SES enrolments from non-AIM HIGH schools was 6.7% in the same period. The percentage of Year 12 Year Group from AIM HIGH Partner Schools who enroll at UON has increased from 14% in 2010 to 26% in 2015 (note: this statistic does not capture students who enroll in universities other than UON).

AIM High also leads to better outcomes for students. Figure B1 below compares the retention and success rates of low-SES students from AIM High schools with low-SES students from comparison schools (data for academic year 2014):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2014 Data</th>
<th>Commencing low-SES enrolments</th>
<th>Retention</th>
<th>Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIM High Schools</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>83.6%</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-AIM High Schools</td>
<td>1663</td>
<td>79.9%</td>
<td>83.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure B1: Impact of HEPP programs on participating schools and university enrolment