Lancashire’s Edge Hill University vice-chancellor John Cater said his organisation had seen ‘a smaller decline’ in applications than the 20% average drop seen in the Universities UK study.

Last July the government confirmed it would scrap bursary funding for nursing students in England and replace it with tuition fees and loans from August 2017.

Health unions argued that the move would reduce the number of nursing degree applications at a time when new nurses were desperately needed.

Optimistic outlook
As in other places, Kingston University has seen applications decrease from the previous year, but school of nursing head Julia Gale said she was confident places would be filled. ‘The changes to bursary funding are challenging higher education providers across the sector,’ said Dr Gale. ‘But we are confident we will continue to attract the highest quality of applicants. ‘We are offering the same number of places on our nursing courses as last year and will continue to monitor the situation.’

A UCAS spokesperson said it was too early to draw conclusions about demand: ‘At this point in the admissions cycle, it is not possible to predict what the demand for nursing courses will be. ‘Application patterns are typically weighted towards the deadline and are affected by the pattern of weekends and public holidays among other factors.’

The Nursing and Midwifery Council has agreed to regulate the new nursing associate role.

It formally accepted a request by the Department of Health to regulate the role at a meeting of its ruling council on 25 January.

Nursing associates, who will require two years’ training and give hands-on care, are intended to fill a gap between healthcare assistants, who are unregistered, and nurses. They will not independently review treatment plans or make decisions on care. The role is controversial, with unions warning it must not be used in place of registered nurses.

The NMC will now seek changes to legislation to enable it to set standards and a framework for the role’s scope of practice. This process is likely to take two years and cost around £4 million – although the NMC insisted this will not be covered by the £120 nurse registration fee.

Instead, the regulator said it would require the government to fund the work. There will be a public consultation.

NMC chief executive Jackie Smith told the meeting she supported adding nursing associates to the register and believed no other regulator could do the job better.

She said: ‘What matters to patients is knowing that the person caring for them has the skills and competence to do the job. If someone else takes on the regulation, we will have no control over clarity, setting the standards and making it clear to nurse associates what we expect of them.’

RCN general secretary Janet Davies called the decision a positive step, but said the cost of nursing associate regulation should not be passed on to current registrants.