

Research report prepared for
the 3rd UNESCO World Higher Education Conference to be held from
May 18 to 20, 2022 in Barcelona, Spain

Higher Education in France: A Right Threatened by Increasing Inequalities?

March 2022



By Juliana Lima, Delphine Dorsi (Right to Education Initiative) and Thibaut Lauwerier (University of Geneva, Francophone Research Network on the Privatization of Education), with input from Hugo Harari-Kermadec (University of Orleans—ERCAE), Claire Calvel and Victor Chareyron (École Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay), as well as students from the Sciences Po Law School in Paris: *Audrey Bergassoli, Hawa Diallo, Margaret Harris and Hicham Touili-Idrissi.*

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Right to Education Initiative, the University of Geneva, the University of Orleans and Sciences Po.

This publication was made possible through the support of the Open Society Foundation.

Introduction	5
I. Higher Education in France: Legal Framework and Practical Organization of the System	7
The Legal Protection of the Right to Higher Education in France	7
The French Higher Education System	8
II. The Impact of Place of Residence on Access to and Participation in Higher Education	11
The Place of Residence as a Cause of Inequality in the Enjoyment of the Right to Education	12
The Cost of Study Increases Inequality	20
III. Privatization in French Higher Education: Trends and Consequences	24
Privatization of Higher Education in France	24
Rising Social Inequality as a Consequence of the Privatization of Higher Education	30
IV. COVID-19 has Exacerbated Inequality in Higher Education	35
The Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Academic Pathways	36
Students Experienced Greater Insecurities, Reflecting the Overall Deterioration of their Living Conditions	37
The Detrimental Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Student Mental Health	39
V. Public Funding of Higher Education is Unequal and Insufficient to Address Persistent Inequality in Access to and Participation in Higher Education	40
Decreasing Financial Resources Despite Increasing Budgets	41
The New Economic Model of Universities has Aggravated the Impact of a Lack of Financial Means	41
Unequal Allocation of Public Spending	42
Private Funding and Tuition Fees	43
Insufficient Aid to Fill Gaps Between Students	44
Conclusion	46

ACRONYMS

BTS — *Brevet de Technicien Supérieur* (French Advanced Technician's Certificate)

CESCR— Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

CESP— *Comité Éthique et Scientifique de Parcoursup* (French Parcoursup's Ethics and Scientific Committee)

CPGE — *Classe Préparatoire aux Grandes Écoles* (French Preparatory Classes for *Grandes Écoles*)

DUT — *Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie* (French Diploma in Technological Studies)

DEUST — *Diplôme d'Études Universitaires Scientifiques et Techniques* (French Diploma in Scientific and Technical Studies)

EFTS— *Établissements de Formation en Travail Social* (French Social Work Educational Institutions)

ENS— *École Normale Supérieure* (Translator's notes: higher establishment for undergraduate and doctoral studies covering most of the literary and scientific disciplines—one of France's *Grandes Écoles*)

Idex— *Initiatives d'Excellence* (Excellence initiatives)

ICESCR— *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*

IFSI — *Institut de Formation en Soins Infirmiers* (French Nursing School)

IGAENR — *Inspection générale de l'Administration de l'Éducation nationale et de la Recherche* (General Education and Research Administration Inspectorate)

INP — *Institut National Polytechnique* (Translator's notes: French institution combining research, academics, and innovation in science and technology)

I-SITE— *Initiative Science-Innovation-Territoires-Economie* (Science-Innovation-Territories-Economy Initiative)

IUT — *Instituts Universitaires de Technologie* (French University Institutes of Technology)

MENJS — *Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports* (French Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports)

MESRI — *Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation* (French Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation)

SIES — *Systèmes d'Information et des Études Statistiques* (Information Systems and Statistical Studies)

STS — *Sections de techniciens supérieurs* (Senior Technician Section)

Introduction

International human rights law provides that higher education shall be made equally accessible to all without discrimination, on the basis of capacity. This should be accomplished by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.¹ Most tuition fees and other related study costs such as accommodation and transportation, however, have been rising in many countries over the past years. This has resulted in posing significant barriers to equality of access to Higher Education—especially for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, this trend has been exacerbated by the increasing commodification and privatization of education globally.

While France provides overall affordable and inclusive access to higher education, public policies are increasingly affected by this global trend. During the last periodic review² of France’s compliance with the standards defined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) found, “with concern, that socio-economically disadvantaged students have poor academic outcomes”. They have also recommended that France “make sure that indirect costs related to Higher Education do not prevent students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access education”.

This finding raises fundamental questions: Is French Higher Education truly accessible to all, without any discrimination? What are the impacts of the privatization of Higher Education on the right to equal access to Higher Education and quality education for all? These questions are all the more relevant in view of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has highlighted the inequalities impacting the French Higher Education system and widened pre-existing disparities. In particular between young people from privileged backgrounds, mostly attending private educational institutions or *Grandes Écoles*, and young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds, mostly attending public universities.³

This issue has caught the attention of the Right to Education Initiative (RTE).⁴ Since 2018, RTE has conducted research on inequalities in French Higher Education in the light of human rights, in

¹ Article 13.2.c of the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#); Article 4 (a) of the [Convention against discrimination in education](#); Article 2 of the first Protocol of the [Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms](#)

² Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of France, E/C.12/FRA/CO/4, 2016: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/151/78/PDF/G1615178.pdf?OpenElement>

³ World Inequality Lab (2022): [Unequal Access to Higher Education Based On Parental Income: Evidence from France](#)

⁴ www.right-to-education.org

partnership with the [Sciences Po Law Clinic](#)⁵. For 4 years, the organization has supported students⁶ in a research study whose results were published in the report [The Right to Higher Education in France: Impact of Place of Origin and of Cost on Inequality](#) (2019) and in the position paper [The Influence of Place of Origin on Inequalities in Higher Education in France](#)⁷. This study shows that the geographic polarization of academic institutions within the country, the social value associated with certain diplomas, as well as the direct and indirect costs of Higher Education aggravate already existing socio-economic inequalities and create barriers to equal access for all. Combined with privatization and commodification trends in certain fields of Higher Education, the impact of inequalities based on the place of origin of students—which is defined as their place of residence before they begin their higher education experience—only exacerbates the disparities of a system which, despite some progress, is not inclusive enough.

Following these concluding observations, RTE has worked with Thibaut Lauwerier, a researcher in education sciences from the [University of Geneva](#) and member of the [Francophone Research Network on the Privatization of Education](#) (Re²FPE), to delve deeper into the issue of privatization. RTE has also partnered with Hugo Harari-Kermadec ([University of Orleans—ERCAE](#)), Claire Calvel and Victor Chareyron ([Ecole Normale Supérieure Paris Saclay](#)), to explore the financial challenges facing Higher Education in France.

This report summarizes the results of these research projects. Focusing on the impacts of inequalities based on place of residence, indirect study costs and privatization on the implementation of the right to Higher Education in France, this document illustrates the challenges related to the realization of the right to higher education. Overcoming these hurdles for a country like France could, a priori, be held up as an example to others. Lastly, this report highlights France's legally binding obligations and potential infringements, especially with regard to its role in financing the Higher Education system.

⁵ <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ecole-de-droit/en.html>

⁶ Justine Berezintsev, Cristina Durlesteanu and Christopher Lopez (2018-2019). Bertille Bertonotti-Proust, Ana Clara Cathalat and Ana Horvatin (2019-2020). Inès Girard, Fiona Vanston and Elodie Faïd (2020-2021). Audrey Bergassoli, Hawa Diallo, Margaret Harris and Hicham Touili-IDRISSI (2021-2022)

⁷ In 2021, the research carried out by RTE in collaboration with the Sciences Po Law School Clinic was discussed at a [round table](#) with researchers, civil society organisations and student unions. A series of [blogs](#) was also published, highlighting the students' perspective on the impacts of Covid-19 on Higher Education in France and worldwide.

I. Higher Education in France: Legal Framework and Practical Organization of the System

The Legal Protection of the Right to Higher Education in France

The [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR), ratified by France in 1980, provides that States Parties are required to ensure⁸

- a) equal access to Higher Education for all, on the basis of individual capacity, and without discrimination,
- b) and the progressive introduction of free Higher Education.

In practice, this means that States Parties have an immediate obligation to ensure that higher education institutions are available and accessible to all students who are capable of pursuing higher education, without any discrimination. States are required to provide students with adequate facilities and a sufficient number of trained teachers in order to support the delivery of Higher Education, which must be affordable as well as physically accessible. Physical accessibility means that Higher Education must be within physical reach for all students, either by attending classes in a reasonably close area or using new technologies.⁹ Affordability means that education must be financially accessible to all¹⁰, and that States are required to use the maximum of their available resources to “advance as quickly and efficiently as possible” towards the full implementation of free Higher Education.¹¹ This implies that any “deliberately regressive measures” in Higher Education, such as budget cuts, would require the most careful consideration: the State must demonstrate that such regressive measures are fully justified, by reference to the totality of the rights provided for in the Covenant and in the context of the full use of the maximum available resources¹².

These provisions are enhanced by other International Human Rights Law standards.¹³ At the European level, the [Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms](#), ratified by

⁸ Article 2.2 and article 13.2 (c) of the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights](#).

⁹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), [General Comment 13](#), para. 6 (b) (ii).

¹⁰ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), [General Comment 13](#), para. 6 (b) (iii).

¹¹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), [General Comment 13](#), para. 44.

¹² Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), [General Comment 13](#), para. 45.

¹³ Several international treaties guarantee the right to higher education, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention against Discrimination in Education, and the World Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education. For an overview of all international and regional instruments

France in 1974, establishes, in Article 2 of Protocol No. 1, that “No person shall be denied the right to education.” The European Court of Human Rights has founded that any State which has established higher education institutions must guarantee access to them¹⁴.

The French Constitution of 1946 goes beyond international law, establishing that “the provision of free, public and secular education at all levels is a duty of the State,” and that “the Nation guarantees equal access for children and adults to instruction, vocational training”¹⁵. A decision of the Constitutional Council from 2019 ([Decision No. 2019-809 QPC](#)) stated that the tuition fees set by Public Higher Education institutions must take into account the financial resources of students. In addition, Article L123-2 of the French Education Code sets the leading and grounding objectives of the French higher education system, including the success of all students, as well as fighting discrimination, contributing to the reduction of social or cultural inequalities and pledging to advance the achievement of equality between men and women.¹⁶

This legal framework must guide the implementation of public policies in higher education. However, as we will show later in this paper, free Higher Education, guaranteed by Article 13 of the 1946 Constitution’s Preamble, suffers from the direct and indirect costs related to Higher Education, student living costs and Higher Education privatization, which deepen existing social and regional inequalities, thereby hindering the enjoyment of the right to higher education.

The French Higher Education System

The French higher education system offers a variety of institutions, courses and tracks. Access to Higher Education is based on a two-track system. On the one hand, there is an open system, without prior selection¹⁷, which includes public universities delivering three types of diplomas—Bachelor’s degrees, Master’s degrees and Doctorate degrees, after a minimum of three, five, or eight years of

guaranteeing the right to higher education, see [International Instruments - the Right to Higher Education](#), on the Right to Education Initiative website..

¹⁴ European Court of Human Rights, [Guide on Article 2 of Protocol No.1 to the European Convention on Human Rights – right to education](#), updated on 31 December 2021, paragraphs 12 and 13.

¹⁵ Paragraph 13 of the [Preamble to the Constitution of 1946](#). Paragraph 13 of the Preamble to the Constitution of 1946 has the same normative status as the (current) [Constitution of 1958](#), which refers to it in paragraph 1 of its own Preamble. Decision No. 71-44 DC of 16 July 1971; French Constitution of 4 October 1958, Preamble, §1.

¹⁶ Article L123-2 of the Code of French Education Code, paragraphs 1 and 3.

¹⁷ Some programmes are selective, as for example in the dual degree programmes of the University of Paris 1.

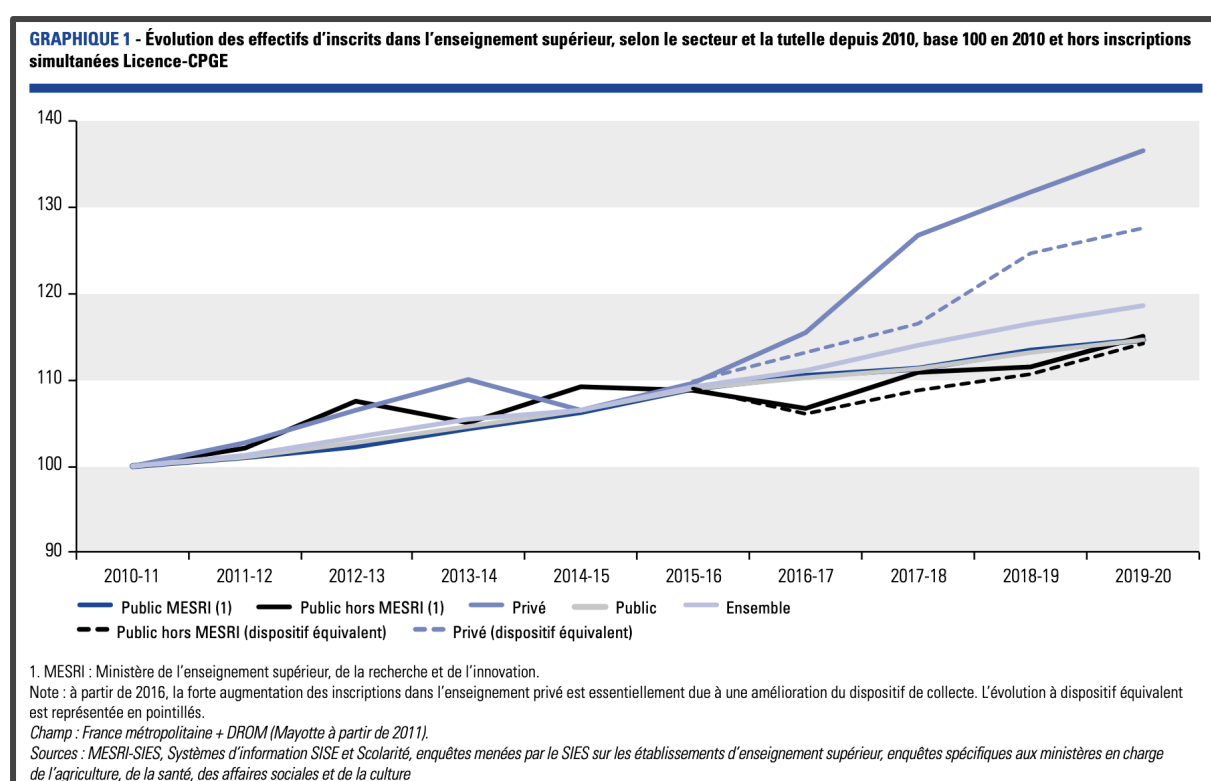
study, respectively. On the other hand, there is a selective system, with both public and private establishments, providing highly specialized programs which can last from two years in vocational tracks to five years to obtain a Master's or equivalent level diploma. Admission into selective institutions relies on a selection process that is usually based on student profiles and motivations, except for the distinct *Grandes Écoles* path which uses entrance exams (Translator's note: *Grandes Écoles* are elite establishments which serve to recruit and prepare the future leadership of France)¹⁸.

¹⁸ As the most prestigious of the selective institutions, the grandes écoles have a strong historical and social legitimacy. They are recognised as training the future elite and ensuring the best chances of employability. The Grandes Ecoles route involves a minimum five-year educational commitment, normally preceded by two years of preparatory classes for the Grandes Ecoles (C.P.G.E). The Grandes Ecoles award a diploma equivalent to a master's degree (BAC+5). Students can continue their studies with a second master's degree and a doctorate.

II. The Impact of Place of Residence on Access to and Participation in Higher Education

Student enrolment in higher education has increased significantly over the past ten years (Fig. 2). “2.89 million students enrolled in higher education institutions in 2020/2021, up 3.1% (+ 87,500 students) year on year. In 5 years, the Higher Education system has welcomed 266,300 new students, up 2.0% per year on average. This increase is significantly higher compared to the last five years, with 220,700 more students between 2010 and 2015²¹.”

Figure 2: Variation in the number of Higher Education students since 2010 (public and private sectors; MESRI and non MESRI institutions; excluding simultaneous Licence-CGPE enrolment)²²



Despite this increase in numbers, however, access to Higher Education remains unequal —depending, among other factors, on students' original place of residence, i.e., the place where students have

²¹ MESRI (2021): Note d'information du SIES n°14 [SIES information note n.14] (French only)

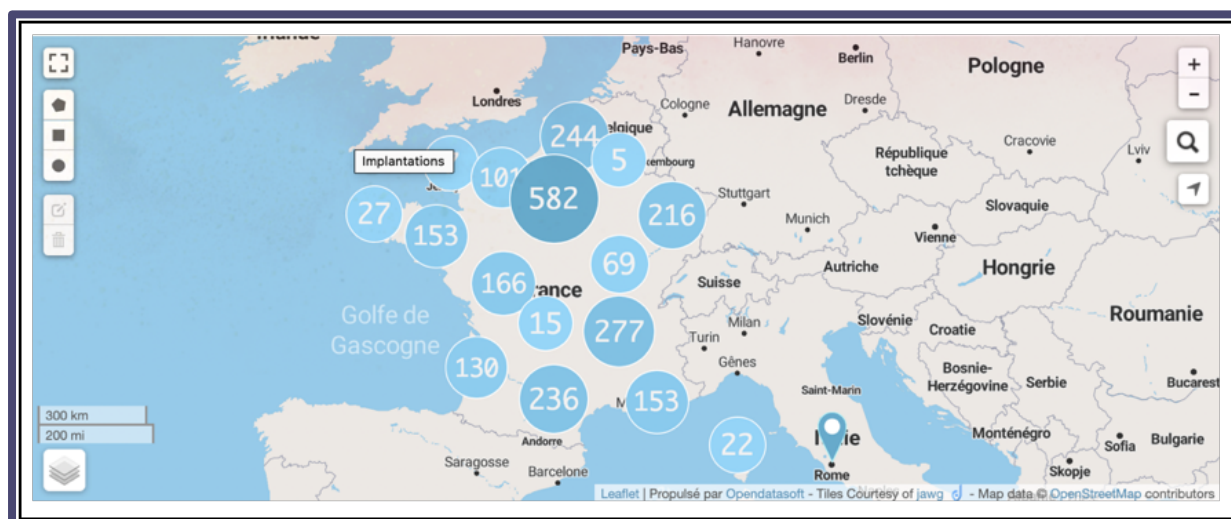
²² MESRI (2020): Note d'information du SIES n° 20 [SIES information note n.20] (French only)

grown up and passed their baccalaureate— which is of major concern from a human right point of view.

The place of residence as a cause of inequality in the enjoyment of the right to education

Even though academic institutions are generally available across regions, some regions offer a variety of institutions, courses and tracks, whilst others have a limited number of options (Fig. 3). This leads to a disproportionate concentration of quality and specialist institutions in specific regions.

*Figure 3: Geographic distribution of public higher institutions in France (2019)
Universities, University Institutes of Technology, INP, Grands établissements, Schools of Engineering—
Metropolitan France*



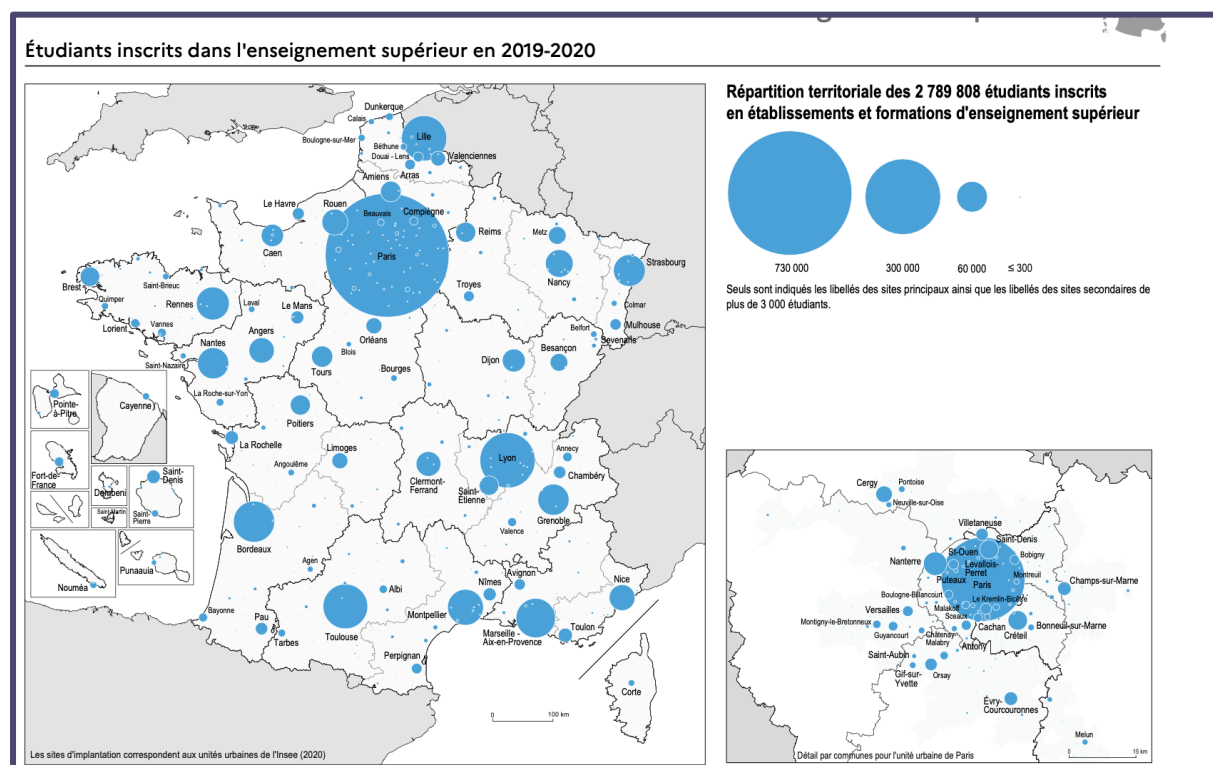
Source: [Implantation des établissements d'enseignement supérieur publics](#)

Within a same region, Higher Education establishments (both public and private) are centred around key cities, such as Paris, Lyon or Lille (Fig. 4).²³ Private higher education institutions, business schools and *Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles* (CPGE) are mainly concentrated in Paris.²⁴

²³ Student mobility into urban areas further strengthens the attractiveness of university metropolises. In this sense, Toulouse, which accounts for 92% of the region's educational offer, continues to attract most of the region's flows. While 81.2% of general baccalaureate holders in Haute Garonne continue their studies in their department, only 3.1% do so in Lot-et-Garonne, which has a much less attractive offer.

²⁴ MENJS (2020): [Repères et références statistiques 2020](#). [Statistical benchmarks 2020] (French only)

Figure 4: Distribution of Higher Education students in France (2019/2020)

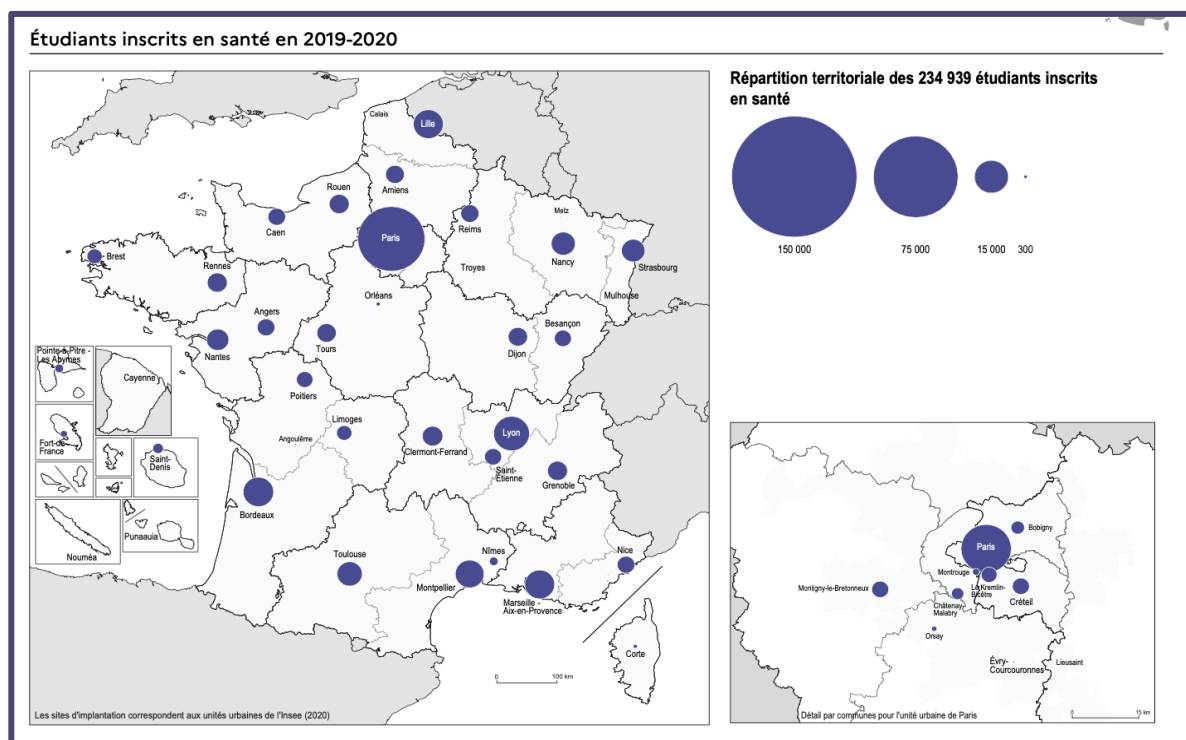


Source: MESRI (2021) : [Atlas régional. Effectifs d'étudiants en 2019-2020](#).

This uneven distribution of higher education institutions in France is reflected in the numbers: in 2019, more than a quarter of students (26.3%) were concentrated in Ile-de-France. Altogether, the main Academies outside the Ile-de-France region—Lyon, Lille, Toulouse, Nantes and Bordeaux— welcomed 29.3% of the total number of students in 2019²⁵. In addition, more than half of healthcare students are concentrated in the Ile-de-France region (Fig. 5). Students enrolled in business, management and/or accounting schools are concentrated in four key cities: Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux et Lille (Fig. 6).

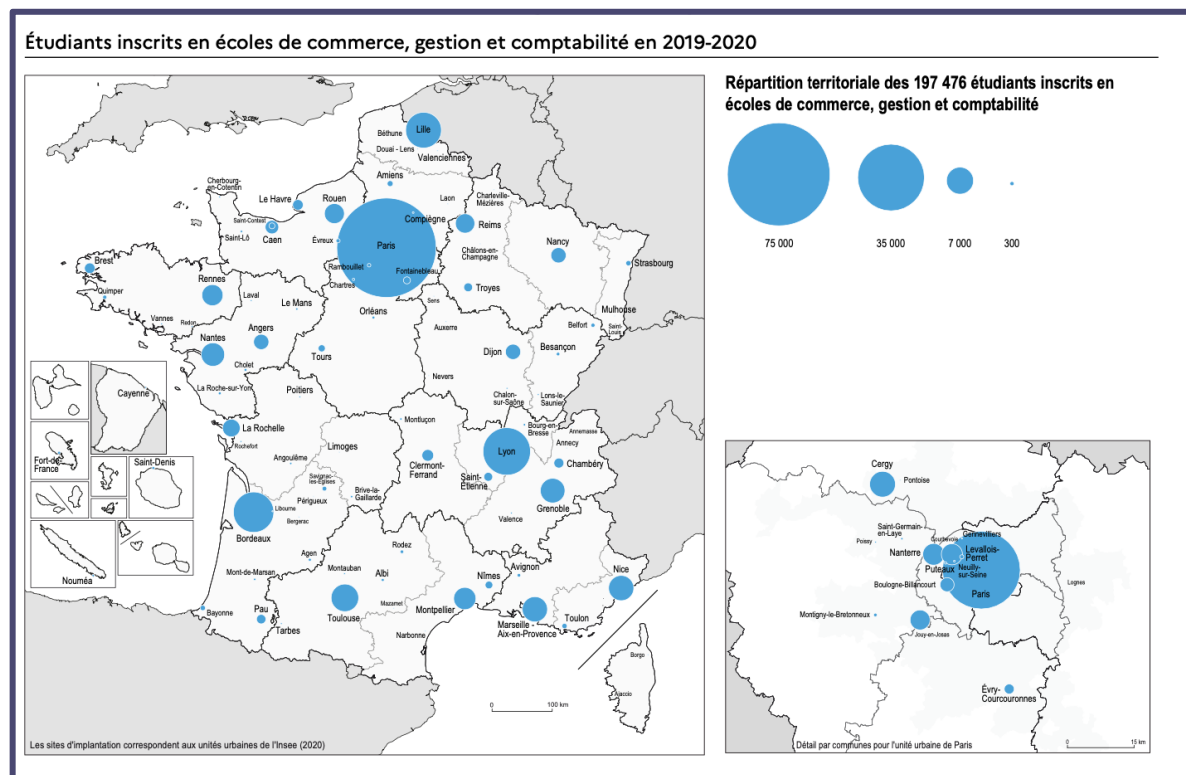
²⁵ MENJS (2020): Repères et références statistiques 2020. [Statistical benchmarks 2020] (French only)

Figure 5: Students enrolled in medical and paramedical schools overseen by MESRI (2019/2020)



Source: MESRI (2021) : [Atlas régional. Effectifs d'étudiants en 2019-2020](#)

Figure 6: Business, management and accounting schools (2019–2020)



Source: MESRI (2021): [Atlas régional. Effectifs d'étudiants en 2019-2020](#)

Although the uneven distribution of higher education institutions across the French territory can be justified by the size and population of each region, data on the mobility of students show that students tend to move to cities with the widest choice of higher education programs. Indeed, fewer than 20% of all students enrolled in Paris in 2017 were from Ile-de-France.²⁶ Student mobility is even higher in the French overseas regions.

This disparity in higher education offerings across regions makes it more difficult for students who live far away from these centres to access them, due to the distance from their original place of residence and to additional transportation and housing costs.

The impact of place of origin on inequalities of access to higher education is exacerbated by socio-economic disparities across French regions and, to a lesser extent, across French departments. The median standard of living is higher in Ile-de-France and Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes: it is 1.8 times higher in Paris than in La Réunion²⁷. When comparing living standard and poverty data by regions²⁸, and by socio-professional categories²⁹, we have found that disparities in living standards are reflected in the share of *cadres* (senior managing positions) in each region. However, children of *cadres* or parents with socially valued positions (so-called higher intellectual professions) are overrepresented in Higher Education: they account for 34.2% of the student population (Fig. 5), versus 21.5% of the total population.³⁰ The share of children of *cadres* is also higher in more selective and prestigious tracks: “Children of *cadres* represent more than half of students in CGPEs, engineering schools, *Écoles Normales Supérieures*, and nearly half of students in business schools”.³¹ On the other hand, children of workers are under-represented in most tracks, except in STS (*Section de Technicien Supérieur*) programs (22.9%) and in paramedical and social work schools (18.7%).³²

²⁶ RTE, Sciences Po (2020): “Limited Potential” The Right to Higher Education in France Impact of Place of Origin and of Cost on Inequality.

²⁷ Études statistiques de la Depp, Géographie de l'École, douzième édition, 2017, tiré de: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/cid57105/geographie-de-l-ecole-douzieme-edition-2017.html> (French only)

²⁸ INSEE (2021): [Household income and wealth](#)

²⁹ INSEE (2021): [Niveau de vie et pauvreté selon la catégorie socioprofessionnelle](#) (French only)

³⁰ INSEE (2021): [Catégorie socio-professionnelle selon les sexes et l'âge](#) (French only)

³¹ MENJS (2021): [Repères et références statistiques](#), chapter 6, p. 178. (French only)

³² MENJS (2021): [Repères et références statistiques](#), chapter 6, p. 178. (French only)

Figure 7: Social origin of French students in 2020/2021, in %

	Agriculteurs, artisans, commerçants et chefs d'entreprise	Cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures	Professions intermédiaires	Employés	Ouvriers	Retraités et inactifs	Ensemble (1)	Proportion de valeurs manquantes
Universités	9,0	32,8	15,2	17,6	10,7	14,8	100,0	8,2
dont préparation DUT	10,0	30,4	18,2	20,1	12,5	8,9	100,0	3,1
dont formations d'ingénieurs (2)	8,7	45,4	15,8	13,1	8,1	9,0	100,0	4,8
dont autres formations	8,9	32,8	14,9	17,4	10,6	15,5	100,0	8,7
Formations d'ingénieurs hors université (2)	12,0	54,9	11,6	9,2	5,2	7,0	100,0	8,6
STS	12,1	15,4	14,7	19,7	22,9	15,3	100,0	10,2
CPGE et préparations intégrées	10,7	52,1	12,5	11,0	7,2	6,5	100,0	2,7
Écoles de commerce, gestion et comptabilité	18,8	48,6	9,7	10,2	5,1	7,7	100,0	38,8
Établissements privés d'enseignement universitaire	15,2	45,6	11,5	12,0	6,8	8,9	100,0	14,0
Écoles normales supérieures	6,8	63,5	10,4	7,1	2,4	9,9	100,0	4,1
Écoles artistiques, d'architecture et de journalisme	14,1	45,9	15,5	11,5	5,4	7,5	100,0	41,9
Écoles paramédicales et sociales (3)	15,1	23,5	9,3	31,3	18,7	2,0	100,0	11,0
Autres écoles et formations (4)	11,6	46,3	12,0	11,7	6,4	11,9	100,0	33,6
Ensemble des étudiants français	10,7	34,2	14,0	17,1	11,4	12,6	100,0	13,1

► Champ : France métropolitaine + DROM. © SIES

1. Hors valeurs manquantes.

2. Y compris les formations d'ingénieurs en partenariat.

3. Les données concernant les écoles paramédicales et sociales sont celles de 2019-2020.

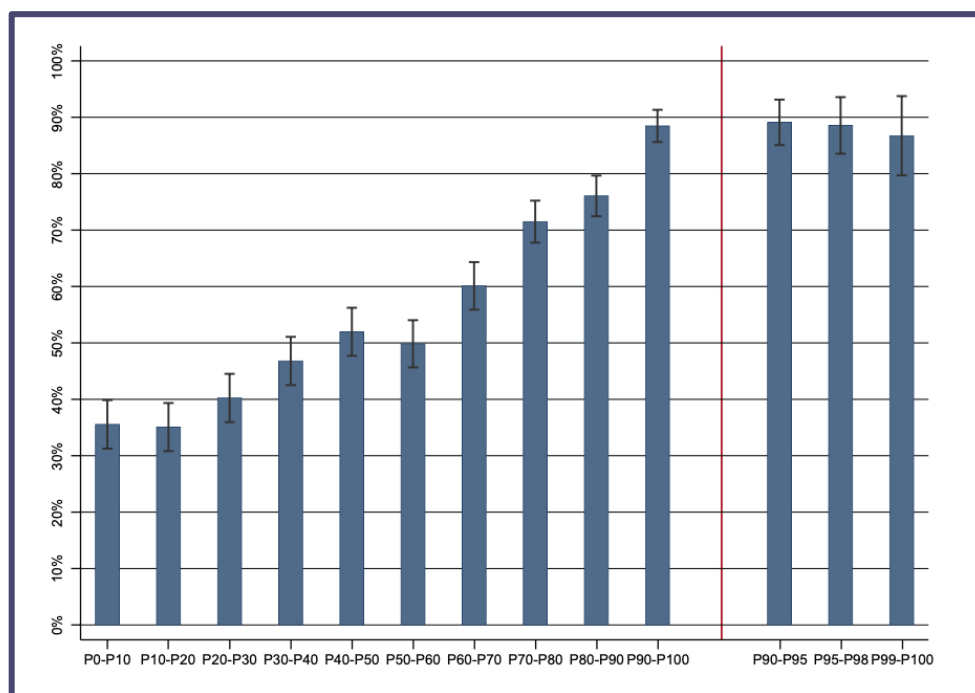
4. Comprend notamment les écoles juridiques et administratives.

Source: MENJS (2021) : [Repères et références statistiques](#).

A recent report by *World Inequality Lab* highlights unequal access to Higher Education in France: the share of 18–24-year-olds with access to Higher Education increases sharply with parental income (Fig. 8): in the bottom quintile of parental income distribution (P0-P20), approximately 35% of individuals aged 18 to 24 are or have been students, and this percentage is nearly three times higher in the top decile (about 90%). Access to selective programs and Master's degrees is even more unequal: in the bottom half of the income distribution, less than 5% of individuals access selective programs, compared to 40% in the top 2% of the distribution (Fig. 9).³³

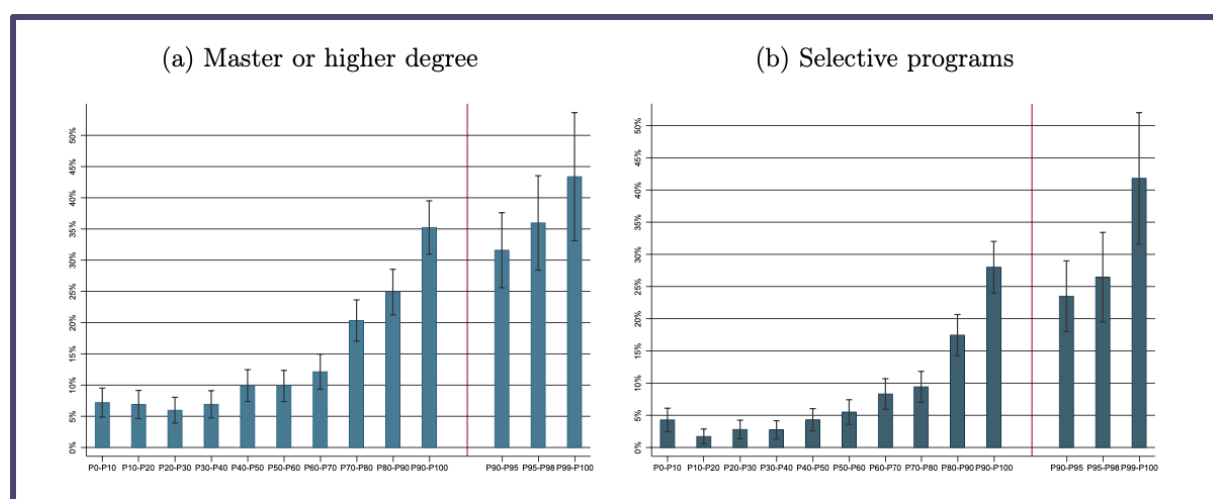
³³ World Inequality Lab (2022): [Unequal Access to Higher Education Based On Parental Income: Evidence from France](#)

Figure 8: Share of individuals accessing higher education between the ages of 18 and 21, by parental gross income



Source: Cécile Bonneau, Sébastien Grobon (2022): [Unequal Access to Higher Education Based On Parental Income: Evidence from France](#)

Figure 9: Share of students aged 18–24 enrolled in a Master's program and in a selective program³⁴, by parental gross income



Source: Cécile Bonneau, Sébastien Grobon (2022): [Unequal Access to Higher Education Based On Parental Income: Evidence from France](#)

³⁴ The OECD considers preparatory courses, elite graduate schools, medical studies and Ph.D. courses as selective programmes. World Inequality Lab (2022): [Unequal Access to Higher Education Based On Parental Income: Evidence from France](#), p.40.

Indeed, socio-economic and regional inequalities aggregate to exacerbate the impact of place of origin on the future of students. Consequences are all the more detrimental as social mobility seems to be higher in regions that have key educational centres³⁵. Thus, students with a low socio-economic background from a region that has an academic centre are more likely to overcome the socio-economic barrier in comparison to those living in remote regions. A report published in 2015 also shows that social mobility in France can vary from 24.7% in la Creuse to 47% in Paris³⁶: both regions have very different profiles in terms of access to, and quality of Higher Education. Indeed, Ile-de-France seems to be number one for social mobility from the working-class, as more than four children of employees or workers out of ten have become *cadres* or intermediate-level professionals. Yet, this region also has the greatest number of higher education institutions. For individuals from a working-class background, social mobility is “strongly related to education —in particular to higher education”³⁷.

Economically disadvantaged students from regions lacking educational opportunities have the hardest time accessing higher education and consequently improving their social class and work prospects, further increasing regional vulnerabilities. This also implies that students living in remote regions who have economic means are more likely to overcome these barriers than students who don’t, as they will have more financial resources to move to a region offering a wider range of higher education choices.

In 2018, a new higher education admission system (*Parcoursup*) was adopted, allowing students to attend higher education establishments outside of the academy in which they passed their *Baccalauréat* (the French high school diploma) or in which their domicile is located, which was previously rarely allowed. Other steps have been taken to promote student mobility across regions³⁸, but their impacts are yet to be studied. Regional quotas, for example, are applied on *Parcoursup*, when an establishment can only welcome a limited number of students in an education program. In such cases, outside geographical priority areas (mobility quota), a maximum threshold is applied based on rankings. Geographical areas, however, are defined according to the geographic location of each applicant’s place of residence, which has thus become a selection criterion, once the quota threshold

³⁵ France Stratégie (2015) : *La géographie de l’ascension sociale* [The geography of social mobility] (French only)

³⁶ France Stratégie (2015) : *La géographie de l’ascension sociale* [The geography of social mobility] (French only)

³⁷ France Stratégie (2015) : *La géographie de l’ascension sociale* [The geography of social mobility] (French only)

³⁸ For example, Passeport Mobilité Études for students from overseas departments and regions; mobility aid of €500 for high school students with scholarships in metropolitan France pursuing higher education in a region other than the one in which they completed their secondary education; territorial quotas; etc.

is reached. Therefore, while geographical priority areas do not prevent mobility, they may limit student access to higher education institutions that are not located in their area of residence, including the ones that are considered to be the most prestigious institutions.

This is what happened at the beginning of the 2019 academic year for students living in the Parisian suburbs: even though they lived a few metro stations away from Paris universities, several high school graduates were limited in their choices because students of the Academy of Paris had first priority. While this issue in Ile-de-France was corrected at the start of the 2020 academic year³⁹, the second report released in 2020 by *Parcoursup*'s Ethics and Scientific Commission has highlighted the need to assess thoroughly the impact of geographical areas of residence on access to higher education establishments, especially since mobility quotas, when combined with other quotas (scholarships, professional baccalaureates and technological baccalaureates), can greatly impact the effects of such policies—at the expense of social inclusion. The question of mobility quotas is all the more sensitive, since “geographical quotas are intended to promote chosen mobility and avoid involuntary mobility, which is a difficult balance to achieve”.⁴⁰

The issue described above shows that the place of residence has a varying and unequal impact on the access to and enjoyment of the right to higher education. However, as pointed out by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), “The exercise of Covenant rights should not be conditional on, or determined by, a person’s current or former place of residence; e.g., whether an individual life or is registered in an urban or a rural area”.⁴¹ Therefore, a student’s place of origin and residence may be considered as another discriminating factor, just like socio-economic status or cultural, racial and linguistic inequalities.

The challenges stemming from the place of origin are further exacerbated by the costs of study (both direct and indirect costs). When considering the social and cultural value associated with educational institutions in France, as well as the disparity in opportunities available to students based on their place of origin, we find that most prestigious and renowned institutions apply high tuition fees. Since these institutions are located in cities where student living costs are higher, inequalities based on students’ original place of residence combine with inequalities based on the cost of higher education,

³⁹ Since the beginning of the 2020 academic year, the Academies of Île de France (Versailles, Paris, Créteil) have been grouped together in a single geographical sector in order to reduce the distortions caused by quotas.

⁴⁰ CESP (2022) : 4e Rapport annuel du Comité Éthique et Scientifique de Parcoursup au Parlement, p.13. [4th Annual Report of the Parcoursup Ethical and Scientific Committee to Parliament, p.13] (French only)

⁴¹ CESCR, General Comment no. 20, paragraph 34

which is contrary to the obligation to provide equal, non-discriminatory, and free access to all students.

The Cost of Study Increases Inequality

The direct cost of Public Higher Education in France can be broken down into two types of fees: the *contribution vie étudiante et de campus* (CVEC)⁴² and the registration fee⁴³. The registration fee rate is set by a ministerial decree⁴⁴ and depends on the courses, the level of study, the socio-economic situation (which is one of the eligibility criteria for scholarships⁴⁵) and the nationality of each student. [Public higher education fees](#) for a French student or a student from another European Union country⁴⁶ vary between €170 per year for a CPGE or *Licence* (Bachelor's degree), €243 for a *Master* (Master's degree), and €380 for a *Doctorat* (Doctorate's degree). Certain public establishments offering highly specialized training apply much higher fees, ranging from €539 for a certificate in speech-language pathology to €2,500 for an engineering diploma, for example.⁴⁷

Tuition fees are even higher in *Grandes Écoles*. Although the ladder of fees takes into account students' household revenue, fees can vary between €0 and €13,190 per year for a Bachelor's degree at [Sciences Po](#), and between €7,200 and €52,050 per year at [HEC](#). These fees remain much too high for students from low- or middle-income households who do not receive any State financial aid. These institutions with high tuition fees, however, are the ones that offer the best professional

⁴² The CVEC is collected by the CROUS to support, on the one hand, students' associative initiatives and, on the other hand, the services present on campus (health care, social support, sports activities). All students enrolled in a higher education institution, whether public or private, must pay the CVEC. In 2020-2021 the CVEC amount was €92.

⁴³ The right to free higher education in France is laid down in paragraph 13 of the preamble to the Constitution of 1946, which is part of the constitutional block of the Constitution of 1958, in force. When asked to rule on registration fees in public higher education, the Council of State ruled that the low registration fees do not violate the French Constitution and do not hinder equal access to education, particularly in view of the aid and exemptions intended for students. [Decision No. 2019-809 QPC of 11 October 2019](#). (French only)

⁴⁴ Article 48 of Law No. 51-598, 24 May 1951, determines that the costs of public higher education are set by the Ministry of State to which the degree is linked.

⁴⁵ Students with French government scholarships, scholarships based on social criteria, or 'Pupilles de la Nation' are exempt from paying tuition fees.

⁴⁶ Foreign students from outside the European Union pay different registration fees. They vary from €2770 for a bachelor's degree to €3770 for a master's degree (compared to €170 for a bachelor's degree and €243 for a master's degree for students of French nationality). When asked to rule on registration fees in Public Higher Education, the Council of State validated the differentiated registration fees for internationally mobile students. [Decision no. 2019-809 QPC of 11 October 2019](#). (French only).

⁴⁷ République Française (2021): [Tuition Fees](#)

opportunities, thereby further increasing inequality. Indeed, a *Grande École* leads to higher employability rates post-graduation as well as a faster timeline in finding a job⁴⁸.

The disparity in registration fees, depending on courses and on the type of establishment, only exacerbates the inequality of access described in the previous section. For example, since most *Grandes Écoles* are located in areas where living costs are higher, students have to pay for indirect mobility costs in addition to tuition fees. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has formulated recommendations on this matter, encouraging France to “work on preventing indirect costs related to higher education from impeding individuals coming from disadvantaged families from accessing higher education.”⁴⁹ This recommendation from CESCR stresses the importance of considering student living costs when analysing inequality of access to higher education. Indeed, according to a recent survey by the French student union UNEF ([Panier Social Étudiant](#)), student living costs have increased by 3.69% at the national level, with significant differences between regions.⁵⁰ As shown in Figure 10, students’ average monthly expenses in metropolitan France vary between €1,318.31 in Paris and €790.75 in Limoges, a difference of €527.56.⁵¹

⁴⁸ A survey conducted by the Conférence des Grandes Écoles (CGE) on the integration of Grandes Écoles graduates, published in June 2021, reveals a net employment rate of 79.1% within six months after graduation and 92% at fifteen months on the labour market. The survey also indicates that 57.4% of Grandes Écoles students are hired before graduation and 77.1% of graduates are hired on permanent contracts with an average net salary (excluding bonuses) of €35,461. See also: CGE (2022), *Livre Blanc Ouverture Sociale Et Territoriale Des Grandes Écoles*. For more information, see: CGE (2022), *White Paper on the Social and Territorial Opening of the Grandes Écoles* (French only)

⁴⁹ CESCR (2016): [Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of France](#) * (E/C.12/FRA/CO/4)

⁵⁰ The calculation of the ‘student social basket’ is based on four ‘typical’ student profiles, defined because they are representative of the student environment. For each of these profiles, the difference between expenditure and aid received (grants based on social criteria and APL) is used to define a ‘remaining cost’. The weighted average of the ‘remaining expenses’ of each profile, according to the number of students they represent, makes it possible to define an overall ‘remaining expense’, the change in which compared to the previous year makes it possible to define the change in the cost of living. UNEF (2021), *Panier Social Étudiant*, p. 9.

⁵¹ UNEF (2021): [Classement des villes selon le coût de la vie étudiante](#) [Ranking of cities according to the cost of student life]

Figure 10: Student cities ranking in metropolitan France based on living costs—Unef, 2020

Classement	Ville	Dépenses mensuelles 2020	Evolution
1	Paris	1 318,31 €	3,17%
2	Nanterre	1 172,43 €	2,58%
3	Créteil	1 147,43 €	5,57%
4	Guyancourt	1 105,43 €	3,42%
5	Champs sur Marne	1 101,43 €	4,71%
6	Saint-Denis	1 072,43 €	2,73%
7	Cergy	1 063,43 €	3,96%
8	Orsay	1 058,43 €	3,67%
9	Nice	1 054,00 €	5,06%
10	Evry	1 038,43 €	1,82%
11	Lyon	1 019,33 €	5,95%
12	Bordeaux	1 013,65 €	5,35%
13	Aix-en-Provence	984,58 €	4,10%
14	Marseille	949,58 €	3,92%
15	Lille	948,85 €	3,97%
16	Montpellier	939,58 €	3,85%
17	Strasbourg	936,25 €	4,56%
18	La Rochelle	930,42 €	4,59%
19	Toulouse	917,75 €	4,18%
20	Toulon	897,75 €	3,67%
21	Nantes	893,58 €	4,78%
22	Grenoble	881,75 €	3,86%
23	Rouen	877,88 €	4,00%
24	Rennes	884,25 €	4,84%
25	Metz	871,38 €	4,03%
26	Chambery	868,83 €	3,92%
27	Avignon	860,92 €	3,34%
28	Amiens	859,55 €	3,59%
29	Dijon	858,50 €	3,72%
30	Orléans	854,75 €	3,74%
31	Le Havre	849,25 €	3,26%
32	Reims	851,30 €	3,63%
33	Nancy	850,75 €	3,63%
34	Caen	860,38 €	4,98%
35	Tours	851,42 €	4,65%
36	Nîmes	847,58 €	4,93%
37	Besançon	836,58 €	3,95%
38	Clermont-Ferrand	831,75 €	3,97%
39	Mulhouse	828,00 €	3,60%
40	Perpignan	828,63 €	4,12%
41	Angers	828,25 €	4,91%
42	Saint-Etienne	808,00 €	4,91%
43	Pau	806,83 €	4,78%
44	Brest	805,75 €	5,70%
45	Le Mans	796,90 €	4,57%
46	Poitiers	791,91 €	4,32%
47	Limoges	790,75 €	5,58%

Source: UNEF (2021) : [Classement des villes selon le coût de la vie étudiante](#)

In addition, student living costs are directly related to transportation and housing expenses. The latter represents more than half of students' monthly budget.⁵² Average spending on housing amounts to €885 in Paris, €613 in Nice and €347 in Poitiers or Le Mans.⁵³ With an average increase of 2.41% throughout France, the cost of housing rose by 5.54% in Lyon, 4.24% in Bordeaux and 4.11% in Brest

⁵² MENJS (2017): [Plan étudiants : Accompagner chacun vers la réussite \[Student plan: supporting everyone towards success \(French only\)\]](#)

⁵³ UNEF (2020): [Classement des villes selon le coût de la vie étudiante \[Ranking of cities according to the cost of student life\]](#)

between 2018 and 2019.⁵⁴ Student mobility therefore contributes to higher rent prices in university cities, further widening inequality.

Transportation also accounts for a significant part of student spending. With €342 per year, Ile-de-France remains the region where transportation costs are the highest⁵⁵. Nevertheless, disparities in public transport fares between cities outside Ile-de-France remain significant: €336 in Rennes and €90 in Limoges, for example. The gap between metropolitan France and French overseas departments and regions is striking: the prices of annual public transport subscriptions are 47.84% more expensive on average in the overseas territories.⁵⁶

More and more students take a part-time job while studying, which extends the duration of their studies and affects their chances for success. A 2019 report from the *Inspection générale de l'Administration de l'Éducation nationale et de la Recherche* (General Education and Research Administration Inspectorate—IGAENR) points out that three out of four undergraduate students have worked for an entire semester and 36% have worked regularly, at least two years in a row.⁵⁷ In a report on students' financial situation released in 2020, the French Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation (MESRI) points out that “students carrying out a paid activity during the academic year have the highest financial resources, with an average monthly budget of €1059 (of which 45% comes from their employment income) versus €825 for those who do not carry any paid activity.”⁵⁸

The specificities of the French higher education system thus create barriers to equal access to higher education for many students, especially students from regions with few higher education establishments or offering few academic programs. Place of residence thus becomes a factor of exclusion, especially since students have to move for their studies and need to pay for additional costs to access higher education. Since the most prestigious establishments, such as *Grandes Ecoles* or engineering schools, charge higher registration fees and are located in the most expensive cities, some students can be excluded because they cannot afford the direct and indirect costs related to the higher education program of their choice, even though they are willing and capable of studying in such renowned institutions.

⁵⁴ UNEF (2020): Classement des villes selon le coût de la vie étudiante [Ranking of cities according to the cost of student life]

⁵⁵ UNEF (2020): Classement des villes selon le coût de la vie étudiante [Ranking of cities according to the cost of student life] (French only)

⁵⁶ UNEF (2020): Enquête sur le coût de la vie étudiante [Survey of student living costs] (French only)

⁵⁷ MENJS/IGERS (2019): L'emploi étudiant. Rapport 2019-75 [Student employment. Report 2019-75] (French only)

⁵⁸ MESRI (2021): L'état de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation en France [The context of higher education, research and innovation in France] (French only)

Indeed, as the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recalled in its [General comment No. 20](#), *Non-discrimination in economic, social and cultural rights*, “A person’s social and economic situation [...] cannot lead to the refusal of, or unequal access to, the same quality of education [...] as others”.⁵⁹ Moreover, as underlined in the first part of this paper, France is committed to guaranteeing that the right to higher education will be exercised without discrimination and to providing free education.

The trend towards the privatization of higher education in France only aggravates the inequalities raised in this chapter. Therefore, this trend should be analysed from the human rights point of view.

III. Privatization in French Higher Education: Trends and Consequences

Higher Education in France is experiencing increasing privatization, thereby increasing social inequality.

Privatization of Higher Education in France

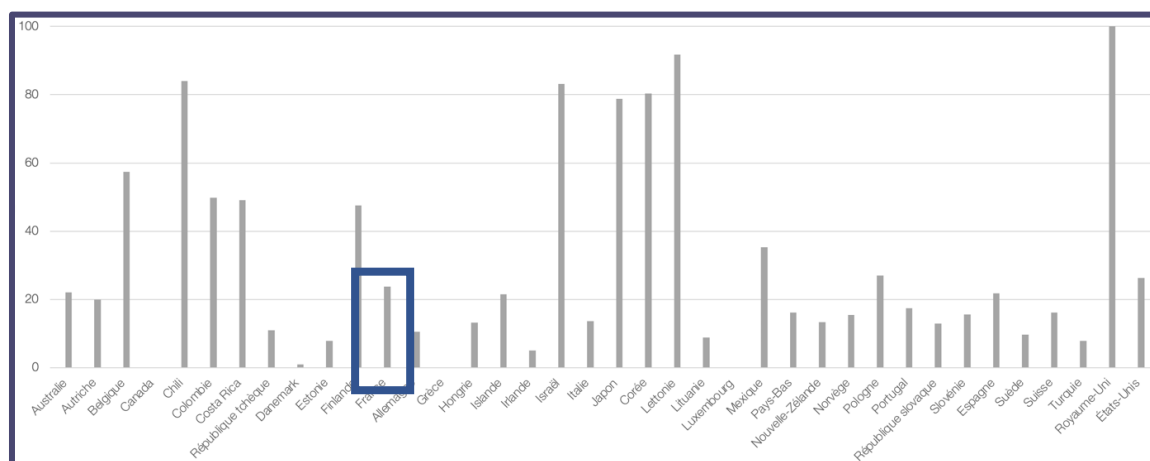
The number of students enrolled in private institutions has grown significantly over the past two decades in France⁶⁰. In 2019/2020, student enrolment in private higher education represented 20% of the total number of students in higher education, i.e., 562,700 students. In some Academies, e.g., Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Nantes, Nice, Paris or Versailles, this rate can even reach 20% to 30% of students.⁶¹ While France is known for its strong public education system, the number of students enrolled in private institutions is close to the OECD average in Higher Education (Fig.11).

⁵⁹ CESCR, [General Comment no. 20](#), paragraph 35

⁶⁰ In France, private schools are mainly religious institutes, engineering schools or business schools.

⁶¹ MESRI (2021): [L'état de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation en France](#) [The context of higher education, research and innovation in France] (French only)

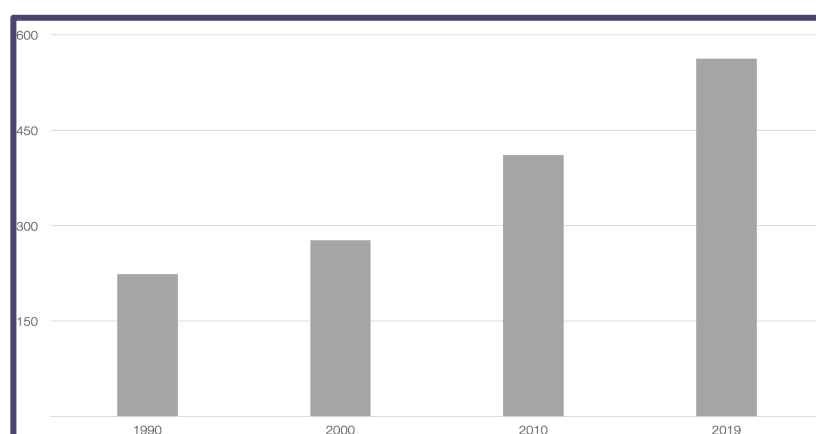
Figure 11: Share of students enrolled in private institutions at the tertiary level in OECD countries, in 2018 (%)



Source: OECD (2021): [Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators](#)

The private sector has seen a stronger increase in student enrolment than the public sector. In fact, over the past 20 years, enrolment in private education (Fig. 12) has doubled, while enrolment in public education has increased by +15%.⁶²

Figure 12: Evolution of student enrolment in private higher education in France since 1960 (in thousands)

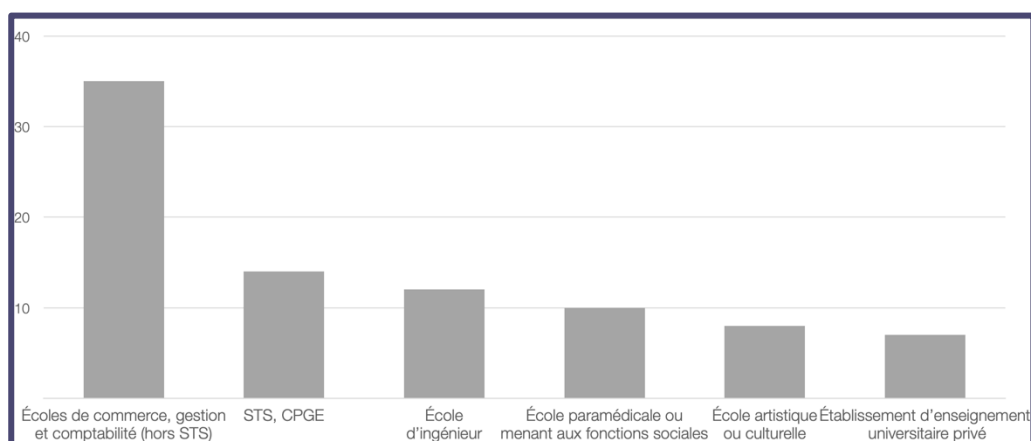


Source: MESRI-SIES / Systèmes d'Information et Études Statistiques (2020) : [Les effectifs dans l'Enseignement Supérieur en 2019-2020](#).

⁶² MESRI (2020): [Les effectifs dans l'enseignement supérieur en 2019-2020 \[Enrolment in higher education between 2019-2020\]](#) (French only)

More than a third of students enrolled in private institutions study in business, management and accounting schools (Fig. 13). In 2019/2020, enrolment in business, management and accounting schools grew by 6.3% annually. Moreover, 35% of students in private institutions were enrolled in these schools, even though registration fees are high.⁶³

Figure 13: Distribution of the types of private higher education institutions in France (%)



Source: MESRI-SIES / Systèmes d'Information et Études statistiques (2021) : [L'état de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation en France](#)

Beyond the number of students, the variety of fields and subjects covered by private institutions has also increased, as well as the number of private establishments, and in particular for-profit institutions. Indeed, “the increasing number of students, as well as a steady, predictable income stream in the form of tuition fees and the purpose of public interest improving their image” make the private sector even more attractive.⁶⁴ These institutions, however, often belong to international industrial or financial organizations seeking to enhance their assets (for example, Apax partners, Bregal capital, Duke Street capital, Ionis or Laureate international universities). These organizations own dozens of establishments in different countries with more than 10,000 students enrolled, and

⁶³ MESRI (2020): [Les effectifs dans l'enseignement supérieur en 2019-2020 \[Enrolment in higher education between 2019-2020\]](#) (French only)

⁶⁴ Peltier, C. (2020): [Les écoles de commerce poussées dans les bras des fonds d'investissement](#). Business schools pushed into the arms of investment funds] (French only)

mostly specialize in business education.⁶⁵ In March 2019, the INSEEC U group, which owns 16 schools, was reportedly acquired by the British firm Cinven for €800 million.⁶⁶

This example shows their ambition to establish their presence in a fast-growing market, building new campuses, running intensive marketing campaigns, and recruiting teachers/researchers. Additionally, the growing success of Private Higher Education seems to rely on the structural issues of Universities: deep-seated funding problems, overloaded classes and, sometimes, high failure rates in the first year. Offering the promise of employment in exchange for very expensive but well-supervised education, private schools criticize by their very existence the lack of means and the slow progress made towards the modernization of university education. Universities are still in the game when it comes to providing purely academic courses. But are they really up to the task in graphic design, business, digital technology, cinema, fashion, entertainment, or video games? These are all areas where access to free and high-quality education is impossible, or only available for a small number of the best students.

Furthermore, while growing demand for higher education in France (which mostly relies on high success rates in secondary education) has led to a wider variety of offers in tertiary education and to a larger share of private institutions, it is also important to note that, over the past twenty years, France's legislative provisions have facilitated the privatization process⁶⁷. They have also impacted the transparency and quality of France's educational offer, as well as the application of national legislation, especially when it comes to controlling quality and to authorizing new establishments.

The borders between private and public education are increasingly permeable insofar as the link between these two is increasingly close. Indeed, private institutions, including for-profit establishments, also benefit from various student aids. For example, private schools, which often provide vocational training, have greatly benefited from the €8,000 annual subsidy granted to companies employing apprenticeship students (a work-study program called *alternance*) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Work-study programs are generally seen as an alternative approach to financing Higher Education, both addressing companies' needs and providing a balance between theoretical learning and vocational training. They also relieve the financial burden of tuition fees for students. Still on the subject of financing, it is also important to note the increasing use of private consulting firms by French ministries, instead of relying on the existing expertise of public research institutions. The

⁶⁵ Casta, A. (2015): L'enseignement supérieur à but lucratif en France à l'aune des porosités public/privé : un état des lieux. [For-profit higher education in France in terms of the blurry lines set the legal framework : an overview] (French only)

⁶⁶ Peltier, C. (2020): Les écoles de commerce poussées dans les bras des fonds d'investissement [Business schools pushed into the arms of investment funds] (French only)

⁶⁷ Béjean, S. & Monthubert, B. (2015): Pour une société apprenante - propositions pour une stratégie nationale de l'enseignement supérieur [Towards a learning society - proposals for a national strategy for higher education] (French only)

rise of private consultancy spending, valued at several million euros, was highlighted by a Senate inquiry committee in January 2022⁶⁸.

The blurred boundaries between private and public sectors are also reflected in the accreditation allowing educational institutions to deliver a *Diplôme d'État* (state diploma), most titles being listed in the *Répertoire national des Certifications professionnelles* or RNCP (National Directory of Professional Certification). The titles of diplomas imply that they are recognized by the French government while most of them are only registered in the RNCP, which does not have the same value.⁶⁹ Additionally, private institutions can receive public funding, in particular in the form of public subsidy. For example, companies employing apprenticeship students received a €8,000 annual subsidy during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁰

Further highlighting this growing proximity, public universities have recently been given the ability to create subsidiary companies to conduct their activities (e.g., foundation businesses, asset management, etc.). These subsidiary companies could provide an additional source of funding in the long run, for example through sponsorship or real estate asset management. Therefore, these company subsidiaries mainly use public money which is managed under private law. University administrators must then approve their accounts but are unable to access them.

The privatization of institutions has also been coupled with the commodification of Higher Education in France in recent years. The increasing internationalization of educational policies, within the context of globalization, has pushed higher education institutions into the global market economy. The ranking of universities —especially the Shanghai Ranking— may push public higher education institutions into the market, seeking economic value and profits. In the public sector, this phenomenon is also illustrated by streamlined educational offerings in favour of subjects that are considered “useful” for the economy. In the private sector, some business schools grant bonuses —exceeding €10,000— to teachers/researchers who publish articles in top-ranked management journals. Of course, such initiatives have an impact on tuition fees.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Magnenou, F. (2022): À quoi correspond la somme de 500 000 euros facturée par le cabinet de conseil McKinsey à l'Éducation nationale ? [To what does the sum of 500,000 euros invoiced by the McKinsey consultancy firm to the Ministry of Education correspond?] (French only)

⁶⁹ Béjean, S. & Monthebert, B. (2015): Pour une société apprenante - propositions pour une stratégie nationale de l'enseignement supérieur [Towards a learning society - proposals for a national strategy for higher education] (French only)

⁷⁰ Université Catholique de Lyon (2021): 8000€... Profitez des aides exceptionnelles de l'État en embauchant nos alternants ! [8000€... Take advantage of exceptional State aid by hiring our work-study students!] (French only)

⁷¹ Harari-Kermadec, H. (2019): Le classement de Shanghai. L'université marchandisée. [The Shanghai Ranking. The Commodified University] (French only)

The commodification of Higher Education has gained momentum in France in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the shift to partially or fully distance learning. Since the first semester of 2020, whether for students or teachers, EdTech companies have been offering their services to ensure teaching continuity. For instance, digital platforms have been rolled out to share educational resources, as well as video conferencing solutions and slide deck presentations.⁷² Several facts⁷³ should alert us to the growing role of such companies in education, and especially in Higher Education (the list below is not exhaustive):

- Their products and services may be available at high cost.
- These companies have not necessarily demonstrated their willingness to contextualize and localize their products (languages of instruction, content, etc.) before the COVID-19 crisis.
- They may contribute to the deterioration of public education by using tax havens.
- The data they collect from consumers can be used for marketing purposes.

The increasingly close relationship between these companies and the French government is particularly cause for concern. For example, the Directorate for Digital Education, attached to the French Ministry of National Education, liaises with EdTech companies on an ongoing basis. These companies are also extensively promoted by public institutions or by international organizations in which France is highly involved as a Member State, such as UNESCO, through its Global Coalition for Education⁷⁴. Public higher education institutions must carefully consider any decision to make investments that greatly benefit the private sector. This kind of investment had already been denounced, such as the purchase of licenses from scientific publishing houses⁷⁵.

⁷² Education International (2021): [Pandemic Privatisation in Higher Education: Edtech & University Reform](#)

⁷³ Lauwerier (2020): [Reactions to COVID-19 from international cooperation in education: Between continuities and unexpected changes](#)

⁷⁴ Lauwerier (2020): [Reactions to COVID-19 from international cooperation in education: Between continuities and unexpected changes](#)

⁷⁵ Data Gueule (2016): [Deprived of knowledge?] (French only)

Rising Social Inequality as a Consequence of the Privatization of Higher Education

The first consequence of this privatization trend is an increase in social inequality. Indeed, most private higher education institutions are only available to students from upper classes. As the number of private institutions is increasing, this long-standing gap keeps widening.

Students from the most privileged backgrounds are the most likely to access private institutions because tuition fees can be high, reaching €10,000 on average per year—and these can be much higher for some schools.⁷⁶ Moreover, private tuition fees have been on the rise since the 1980s. For example, in business and management schools, they increased by 75% on average between 2009 and 2019.⁷⁷ One of the reasons of this “surge in tuition fees”⁷⁸ is that private institutions have the liberty to set their own enrolment fees. It should be noted, moreover, that the number of students enrolled in preparatory classes for business schools such as HEC is down 9%. Indeed, these schools recruit more and more directly after the baccalaureate, at Bachelor’s level. This nevertheless has a cost, of between €5,000 and €15,000, which once again excludes the least privileged students (as detailed in the previous section), especially since the preparatory classes threatened with closure are those that proportionally recruited the highest number of scholarship students—and there are too few of them already in this track.⁷⁹

As a result, two thirds of students in *Grandes Écoles*, most of which are private, come from higher socio-professional categories, while they only represented 23% of all young individuals within the age range of 20 to 24 years in 2016. In the top 10% most selective schools, children of workers or unemployed people represent 5% of students, while children from higher socio-professional categories account for around 80% of classes.⁸⁰

That said, public institutions are also moving toward privatization, since they have already begun to use tuition fees as financial leverage for their own funds. This is especially the case for Sciences Po

⁷⁶ By way of comparison, for French students or students from a country in the European Union, the European Economic Area or Switzerland, tuition fees in 2021 were 170 euros per year for a Bachelor's programme; 243 euros per year for a Master's programme; 601 euros per year for an engineering programme in an institution under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education; 380 euros per year for a Doctorate programme. Source: [Campus France](#)

⁷⁷ MisterPrepa (2022): [L'évolution des frais de scolarité : Combien coûte une Grande École française ?](#) [The evolution of tuition fees: How much does a French Grande Ecole cost?] (French only)

⁷⁸ Parienty, A. (2015). *School business. Comment l'argent dynamite le système éducatif*. [School business. How money drives the education system] (French only)

⁷⁹ FranceInter (2021): [Les prépas HEC en chute libre](#) [HEC prep schools in free fall] (French only)

⁸⁰ IPPP (2021): [Quelle démocratisation des grandes écoles depuis le milieu des années 2000 ?](#) [How democratic have the grandes écoles become since the mid-2000s?] (French only)

Paris and University of Paris Dauphine. For the 2022/2023 academic year, at Sciences Po Paris, the ladder of tuition fees ranges from €0 to €13,190 per year for the Bachelor's degree, and from €0 to €18,260 per year for the Master's degree⁸¹. At Dauphine, tuition fees range from €0 to €2,280 for most Bachelor's degrees and from €0 to €6,630 for almost all Master's degrees.⁸²

In 2018, as part of the "Welcome to France" plan (*Bienvenue en France*), it was decided that foreign students who are not European Union nationals would have to pay €2,770 for a Bachelor's degree and €3,770 for a Master's degree. Also in 2018, the French Ministry recognized the Bachelor's degree of certain *Grandes Écoles* as a *Diplôme national de Licence*, thereby multiplying initiatives in favour of high registration fees for an ever-growing population of students. For example, at *Ecole Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay*, annual tuition fees range from €6,000 to €9,000 for certain Master's degrees.⁸³ This only diminishes the principle of free education defined in the 1946 Constitution,

which poses the question of greater and fairer support from the State to relieve the most disadvantaged households. This does not seem to have been the general pattern of the last few years, as the budget per student fell by 12% in France between 2008 and 2021.

Also, State financial aid is not always proportionate to students' social status. Indeed, even though State aid represents approximately 1/3 of the average monthly financial resources of students belonging to the most disadvantaged social categories (Fig.14), annual public expenditure per student amounts to €8,790 for Universities, where 41% of students are children of workers or employees, €15,110 for preparatory classes, where 16% are children of workers or employees, and even €89,000 for the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* or ENA (France's *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*), where 6% are children of workers or employees.⁸⁴ In the end, "young adults whose parents are at the top of the income distribution receive €33,000 in State funding [over six years], which is one and a half times more than those at the bottom of the distribution (€22,300)".⁸⁵

⁸¹ SciencesPo (2022): [Étudier à Sciences Po, combien ça coûte ?](#) [How much does it cost to study at Sciences Po?] (French only)

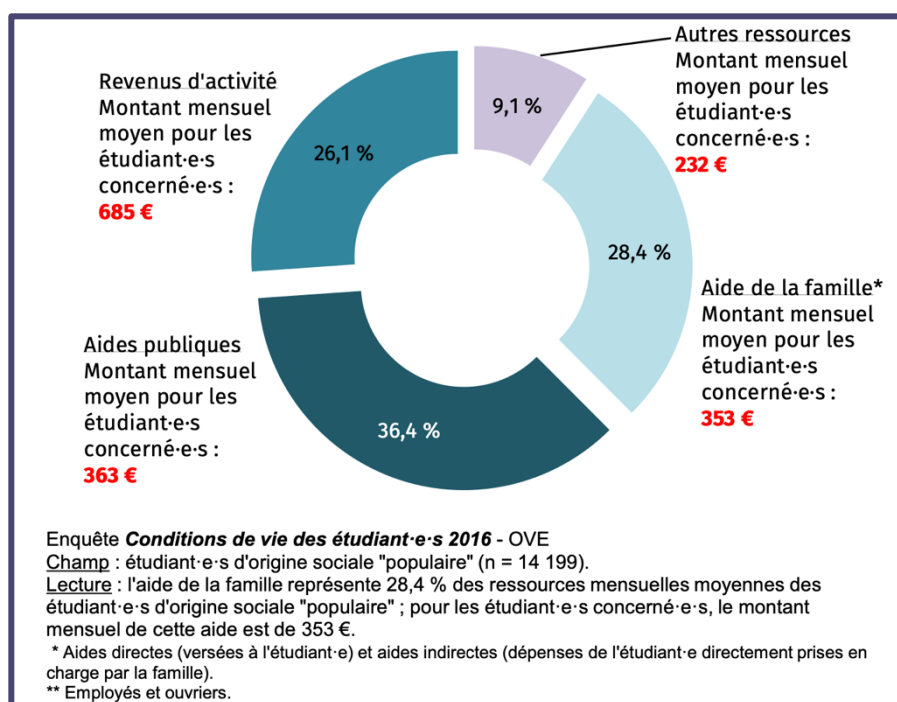
⁸² Dauphine — Université Paris (2022): [Tuition fees](#)

⁸³ Flacher, D. & Harari-Kemardec, H. (2020): [Études supérieures : stop aux frais d'inscription toujours plus chers](#). [Higher education: stop the ever-increasing cost of tuition fees] (French only)

⁸⁴ Ministère de l'éducation (2020): [Note d'information n° 20.35 de la DEPP](#). [DEPP Information note no. 20.35] (French only)

⁸⁵ Bonneau, C. & Grobon, S. (2021): [Enseignement supérieur : un accès inégal selon le revenu des parents](#). [Higher education: unequal access according to parental income] CAE, Focus no 076-2021 (French only)

Figure 14: Average monthly resources of students of working-class background, in % and €



Source: Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2016) : [Enquête sur les conditions de vie des étudiants](#)

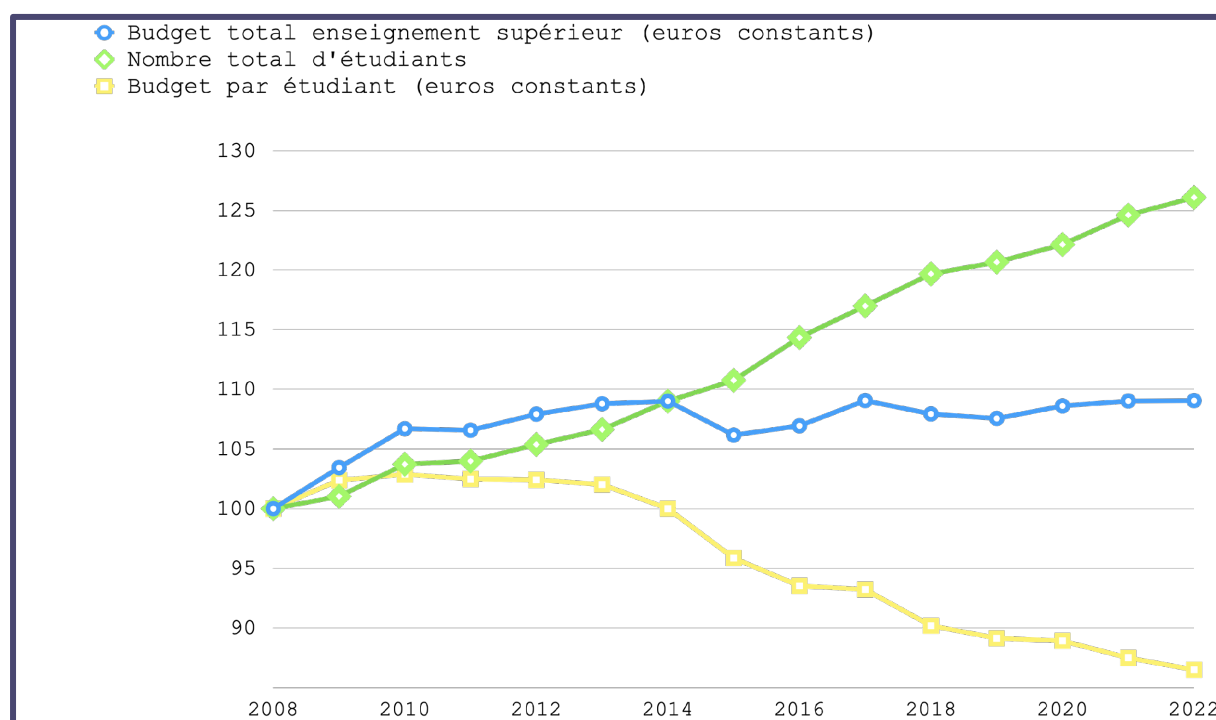
Therefore, students rely on their families' support, part-time jobs or bank loans to pay for their studies. Whether in public or private education, the fact that households, and therefore private entities, contribute to the financing of studies —often in a substantial way— also exacerbates social inequalities. Indeed, although the share of public funding allocated to students (a little less than 70% in 2019) is predominant⁸⁶, the share of households is around 10% (and is constantly increasing since 2010). At the start of the 2019 academic year, however, more than 818,300 students benefited from direct financial aid in the form of grants or loans. This is nearly 45,000 more compared to 2018. In total, student financial and social assistance, including housing assistance and tax relief, reached €5.7 billion (excluding the contribution of social security schemes for students)⁸⁷. More specifically, in private higher education, 22.7% of students from disadvantaged households are scholarship students (compared to 40% in public higher education).

⁸⁶ Compared to other OECD countries, it appears that France is among the countries with the highest share of public funding.

⁸⁷ MESRI (2021): *L'état de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation en France*. [The context of Higher education, research and innovation in France] (French only)

However, these scholarships do not cover all costs related to higher education.⁸⁸ For example, young people may have to spend large sums of money even before starting their studies: to improve their learning skills, future students in private schools are often advised to take private lessons or language trips⁸⁹. Economically disadvantaged students therefore report great financial difficulties because of substantial indirect costs related to higher education, in addition to tuition fees (housing, materials, etc.). Yet, the average budget per student has fallen dramatically in almost 15 years (Fig. 15).

Figure 15: Budget per student in France (base 100 in 2008)



Source: [Data from Piketty, T., updated by Chancel, L. \(2021\)](#)

Moreover, students may struggle to access loans since they have to find a guarantor, which is not always possible. And when students have been granted loans, even if France is not in a comparable situation to that of the United States, student debt becomes a major concern (for 11% of students in

⁸⁸ Gourdon, J. & Davidenkoff E. (2019). *L'irrésistible ascension de l'enseignement supérieur privé* [The irresistible rise of private higher education] (French only)

⁸⁹ Parienty, A. (2015). *School business. Comment l'argent dynamite le système éducatif*. [School business. How money drives the education system] (French only)

business school and 6% of students in engineering school)⁹⁰ and a heavy burden at the beginning of their career.⁹¹

The process of privatization is therefore demonstrated by the fact that, even in Public Education, students and parents greatly contribute to the financing of Higher Education, including the lowest-income households. It is important to recall that under Paragraph 13 of the Preamble to the 1946 Constitution, France “guarantees equal access for [...] adults to instruction [...]. The provision of free, public [...] education at all levels is a duty of the State”. As a result of the aforementioned provisions, the constitutional requirement of free education also applies to Public Higher Education. In 2019, the French Constitutional Council recalled that modest tuition fees in public higher education, where appropriate and depending on the financial capacity of students, do not go against the principle of free education. However, costs for students and their families are high. It is important to note that private funding for education has been threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic with a subsequent fall in employment. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis may be even greater at education levels where education funding mostly depends on household incomes.⁹²

Numerous warnings from various education stakeholders (including academics and civil society organizations) have been conveyed over the last years to raise awareness of the challenges of privatization and its consequences. Without much success. It has been noted, however, that privatization in French Higher Education should be further explored in research studies in order to better understand this process. The organization of the private education system also lacks transparency, as “the current body of legislation is little known, disproportionate to today’s reality and far too complex to understand, both for institutions and for students and families”.⁹³ On top of that, the many measures taken by the French government (e.g., recognition, educational labels, etc.) have made it all the more complex to understand the system and has led to disparities in practices between *Rectorats* (French regional educational authorities). Ensuring transparency in private education and in the French legislation is a top priority for France.

In addition to reducing inequalities—including through increased support to the most disadvantaged households in private and public education—and to redefining Public Education with the aim of

⁹⁰ Observatoire de la vie étudiante (2016): [Enquête nationale Conditions de vie des étudiant.e.s 2016](#) [National Survey of student living conditions 2016] (French only)

⁹¹ Gourdon, J. (2022): [L’insolente santé de l’enseignement supérieur privé](#) [The booming health of private higher education] (French only)

⁹² OECD (2021): [Education at a Glance 2021](#)

⁹³ Roussel, I., Bonhot, J.— P., Gavini-Chevet, C. & Baes-Honoré, C. (2015) : [L’enseignement supérieur privé : propositions pour un nouveau mode de relations avec l’État](#)

attracting more students, a 2015 report⁹⁴ commissioned by the Ministry of Higher Education suggested several enhanced regulatory measures, including:

- “Assessing the non-profit purposes of institutions that are recognized and funded in part by the State, when they are qualified as ‘Private higher education institution of public interest’ (EESPIG).
- Strengthening co-ordination between all Ministries to better understand the multifaceted nature of the Higher Education system (statutes, funding, tuition fees), in all fields of education.
- Strengthening controls by providing the relevant departments of the French Ministry of Education and *Rectorats* with appropriate human resources”.⁹⁵

There is an overall need to redefine the relationship between the State and the private sector, including its legislation, which has not changed since the 19th century. Consequently, the current legislative framework cannot address the recent rapid changes in the education landscape, as well as its regulatory needs. Yet, according to a report commissioned by the French Ministry of Education in 2015, the relationship between the State and the private sector is still “taboo” today.⁹⁶

IV. COVID-19 has Exacerbated Inequality in Higher Education

The closure of higher education institutions and the shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the inequalities highlighted in the previous sections, with heavy impact on students’ vocational choices and career path as well as on their already precarious economic situation.

⁹⁴ It should be noted that since 2015 there have been no official reports, notably not from the Ministry of Higher Education, which has delved into the challenges of private involvement in the education sector.

⁹⁵ Béjean, S. & Monthubert, B. (2015): [Pour une société apprenante - propositions pour une stratégie nationale de l'enseignement supérieur](#) [Towards a learning society - proposals for a national strategy for higher education] (French only)

⁹⁶ Roussel, I., Bonhotal, J.— P., Gavini-Chevet, C. & Baes-Honoré, C. (2015): [L'enseignement supérieur privé : propositions pour un nouveau mode de relations avec l'État](#) [[Private higher education: proposals for a new relationship with the state](#)] (French only)

The Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Academic Pathways

A survey conducted on behalf of the *Federation des Associations Generales Etudiantes* or FAGE (France's National Federation of Students' Associations) revealed that 8 out of 10 students in Higher Education had the impression that they were dropping out of school during the first lockdown.⁹⁷ The risk of dropping out was all the greater as higher education institutions remained closed after the first lockdown. Between March 2020 and the start of the 2021 academic year, students barely had a few weeks of face-to-face classes (September/October 2020).⁹⁸ The easing of COVID-19 restrictions from January 2021 announced by the French Government, authorizing higher education institutions to reopen classrooms for certain categories of students at 50 per cent capacity, has only benefited a small proportion of students⁹⁹ while the vast majority of Higher Education students have continued to take online courses.

Distance teaching, however, has revealed significant disparities in higher education institutions' and teachers' readiness to use digital educational tools for virtual learning.¹⁰⁰ The [report](#) published by the inquiry committee in charge of assessing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on young people, at the French National Assembly, underlines significant "disparities between establishments of different categories, both in the use of digital teaching tools, which is more developed in *Grandes Écoles*, and in study conditions which vary for each course".¹⁰¹ A [survey](#) conducted by the *Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante* or OVE (French Observatory on Student Life) showed that 96% of students in preparatory classes received learning resources and materials during the first lockdown, compared to only 74% in other study tracks.¹⁰² Despite gradual adjustments during the pandemic, not all higher education institutions have rolled out online learning programs: 94% of students in preparatory classes and 81% of students in engineering schools said they had been able to attend virtual classes or meetings using video conferencing solutions, compared to 62.5% of university students.¹⁰³ These disparities in online learning methods have only exacerbated the inequalities highlighted in this report: while some

⁹⁷ IPSOS/FAGE (2021) : [Le jeunes face à la crise : l'urgence d'agir](#). [Young people facing the crisis: the urgent need to act!] (French only)

⁹⁸ Research is needed to better understand all aspects of the effects of the closure of higher education institutions on student outcomes and success.

⁹⁹ Research is needed to better understand all aspects of the effects of the closure of higher education institutions on student outcomes and success.

¹⁰⁰ National Assembly (2020) [Report of the Committee of Inquiry to measure and prevent the effects of the covid-19 crisis on children and youth](#) (French only)

¹⁰¹ National Assembly (2020) [Report of the Committee of Inquiry to measure and prevent the effects of the covid-19 crisis on children and youth](#) (French only)

¹⁰² Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d'étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

¹⁰³ Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d'étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

students only received one PowerPoint slide deck, others were able to communicate regularly with their teachers.

The shift to digital has also revealed unequal access to technology: a personal computer, good Wi-Fi coverage and a quiet space to study are even more important for students' success in times of a pandemic. Despite the assistance provided by certain Universities (e.g., lending computers, providing study rooms) and by the French Government¹⁰⁴, some students did not have any IT equipment and/or Internet access at home during the pandemic, and were therefore unable to study effectively. Nearly one in four students experienced Internet access problems during the first lockdown, while 20% faced difficulties in accessing educational materials and 17% had a hard time using the digital tools available.¹⁰⁵ Great disparities have been found between different tracks: 72% of students in preparatory classes and 69% of students in business schools had "good Wi-Fi coverage", compared to 61% of university students.¹⁰⁶ Seventy-nine percent of students in preparatory classes and 67% of students in engineering schools had a "quiet and private" space to study, versus only 55% of university students.¹⁰⁷

Yet, lockdowns have brought to light other aspects of the equality issues raised in this report, while exacerbating them: students in preparatory classes and in *Grande Écoles*, who often come from privileged social backgrounds, could study remotely under better conditions than university students.¹⁰⁸

Students Experienced Greater Insecurities, Reflecting the Overall Deterioration of their Living Conditions

In the previous sections, we have seen that the direct and indirect costs of higher education pose significant barriers to the full realization of the right to education and that more and more students have to combine work and study, especially in the context of growing privatization. The COVID-19

¹⁰⁴ In a hearing at the National Assembly, the Minister for Higher Education indicated that 'for all universities, 1,800 computers have been purchased and made available to students, 4,800 have been loaned by the institutions and more than 5,000 SIM cards and 4G keys have been distributed'. National Assembly (2020): [Report of the Commission of Inquiry to measure and prevent the effects of the covid-19 crisis on children and youth](#)

¹⁰⁵ Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d'étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

¹⁰⁶ Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d'étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

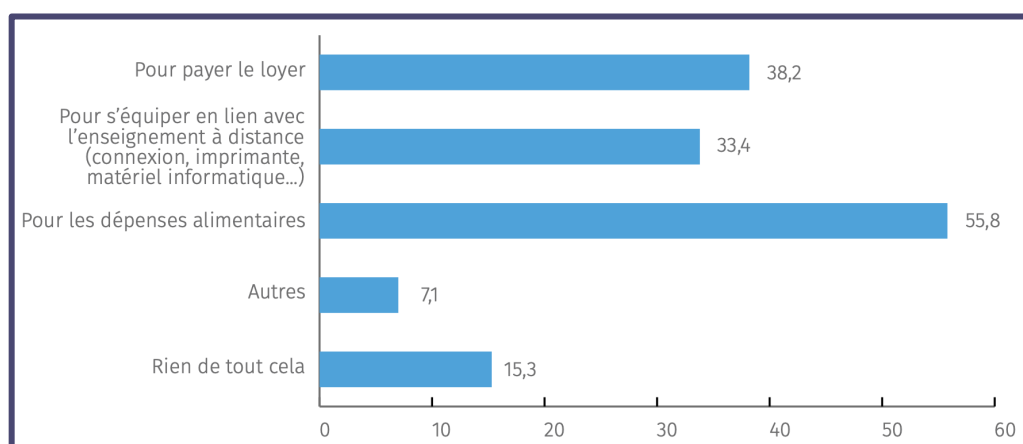
¹⁰⁷ Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d'étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

¹⁰⁸ National Assembly (2020): [Report of the Commission of Inquiry to measure and prevent the effects of the covid-19 crisis on children and youth](#)

containment measures imposed by the French Government have had a lasting impact on industries that employ large numbers of students (e.g., catering, events, or even internships and apprenticeships), causing great financial strain for them¹⁰⁹.

Indeed, 36% of students who had a part-time job during the first lockdown had to stop working due to COVID-19 measures.¹¹⁰ Among them, only 27% were able to benefit from the partial activity scheme (*chômage partiel*). For all the others, income losses were estimated at an average of €274 per month, which had a major impact on students' finances¹¹¹. Foreign students have suffered the most from the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: 45.7% of them reported financial distress during the lockdown (versus 12.3% of French students), while 23% said that they did not have enough to eat because of money issues. Scholarship students have also been severely impacted by the crisis: 18.4% of scholarship students surveyed by OVE said they had financial difficulties, compared to 15.8% for non-scholarship students.

Figure 16: Types of financial issues experienced during lockdown (in %)



Source: Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020) : [La vie d'étudiante confinée](#)

Faced with insecurity, students had to turn to their parents: more than 30% of Higher Education students surveyed by OVE said they received financial support (21%) or material support (12.6%) from

¹⁰⁹ Inès Girard, Fiona Vanston and Elodie Faïd, "All of my income disappeared overnight": economic precarity for students during the pandemic, Right to Education Initiative (2021)

¹¹⁰ Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d'étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

¹¹¹ Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d'étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

their parents during the lockdown¹¹². Students in more precarious financial situations, who need to work to pay for their studies and cannot be supported by their parents, were doubly impacted.

In order to address financial difficulties and cope with loneliness, nearly half of students surveyed by OVE after the first lockdown said they moved in with their parents.¹¹³ For 44% of them, being “forced to live together” led to increasing conflict.¹¹⁴

The Detrimental Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Student Mental Health¹¹⁵

The pandemic has had serious consequences on students’ mental health. The report from the inquiry committee in charge of assessing and preventing the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on children and young people pointed out “disrupted higher education programs and truncated student lives.” Besides having to reconsider their daily study routine, students have also suffered great psychological distress due to campus closures.

Indeed, campus life contributes to the full realization of the right to education. University campuses are not only places of study. They are also places where students have a social life, meet new people, make new friends, try new experiences, commit to causes, and show solidarity. The closure of higher education institutions has led to loneliness and psychological distress for many students. It was especially difficult for students who enrolled in Higher Education during the pandemic and who discovered a whole new world from home, without getting to familiarize themselves with their campus.

According to a survey conducted after the first lockdown, nearly 3/4 of young people aged between 18 and 25 said they have suffered from psychological, emotional or physical distress (73%). While remote learning has been extended over time, as well as restrictions on social gatherings, more and more students described themselves as “depressed”, “anxious”, “lonely”, “sad”, “unmotivated”. Many experts have issued warnings over the rising rate of suicides and the increasing number of psychiatric admissions.

¹¹² 11.4% said they had received financial assistance from CROUS. Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d’étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

¹¹³ Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d’étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

¹¹⁴ Observatoire de la Vie Étudiante (2020): [La vie d’étudiante confinée](#) [Life as a confined student] (French only)

¹¹⁵ Inès Girard, Fiona Vanston and Elodie Faïd, [Mental health: the silent pandemic in higher education](#), Right to Education Initiative (2021)

Faced with the distress of students, which was repeatedly pointed out by the media¹¹⁶ and by students themselves (#EtudiantsFantomes), the French Government announced in January 2021 a new mental health scheme for students. This scheme consisted in recruiting 80 psychotherapists on a temporary basis for 2021, and in implementing a mental health care program entitling each student to three therapy sessions without any cost advance. Although these support measures were welcomed, they proved to be insufficient given the scale of the crisis.

In addition, university health care services were already understaffed and under-equipped before the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in mental health care units. The report signed by the deputies of the French National Assembly thus underlines that the ratio between the number of psychotherapists and the number of students is 1 psychotherapist in full-time equivalent worked (FTEW¹¹⁷) for 29,882 students¹¹⁸, i.e. 8 times higher in France than the average of the other countries listed by the charitable organization Nightline. The inquiry committee in charge of assessing and preventing the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on children and young people, at the French National Assembly, concluded that this French ratio is far from meeting certain international recommendations —1 full-time psychotherapist for 1,000 to 1,500 students. Therefore, they have recommended to make this temporary scheme permanent.

V. Public funding of Higher Education is unequal and insufficient to address persistent inequality in access to and participation in Higher Education

¹¹⁶ The Conversation (2020): [Pourquoi la souffrance psychologique des étudiants est difficile à appréhender?](#) [Why the psychological suffering of students is difficult to understand]; Le Monde (2020): [La crise de la santé mentale étudiante précède le Covid-19, elle ne s'éteindra pas avec lui](#) [The student mental health crisis precedes Covid-19, it will not end with it]; Le Monde (2020): [La prise en charge de la souffrance psychologique des étudiants](#) [Taking care of the psychological suffering of students: the need for resources] (all French only)

¹¹⁷ Full Time Equivalent (FTE) is a measure to take into account the workload of academic psychologists, not only their number: <https://www.nightline.fr/actualites/2020-11-23/surmenage-des-psychologues-universitaires-rencontres-avec-trois-specialistes>

¹¹⁸ National Assembly (2020): [Report of the Commission of Inquiry to measure and prevent the effects of the covid-19 crisis on children and youth](#)

A decrease in financial resources despite increasing budgets

In France, national expenditure on tertiary education has been rising almost continuously since 1980, with an increase of more than 273.9% over 40 years.¹¹⁹

In 2018, France spent 1.5% of its GDP on Higher Education, just above the OECD average.¹²⁰ However, at the same time, expenditure per student has been in constant decline for six years now (-1.4% in 2019 and -7.9% since 2009). The increase in the number of students (43% in 40 years)¹²¹ has not been compensated by a proportional increase in spending, leading to unjustified underfunding of Higher Education in France.

The new economic model of universities has aggravated the impact of a lack of financial means

For the last fifteen years, public policy-makers seem to have shifted their ideological positions: the concept of social diversity, which was predominant in the 20th century, has been declining in favour of the rhetoric of excellence.¹²² This ideological shift is reflected in the French legislation: the law of 2007 related to the freedoms and responsibilities of universities (*Loi relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités*—LRU) gave greater autonomy to Universities which now have total control on their budget and payroll. In practice, this new responsibility has led to a continuous fall in supervision rates (student/teacher ratio)¹²³ since 2013¹²⁴ and to a lack of transparency around certain expenses, in particular those related to administrative groupings, or communications. In addition, the drop in public expenditure per student over the last decade shows that the implementation of this law has not been coupled with additional investment in Higher Education, which means that the LRU law does not address the lack of financial resources. This rationale for higher education funding has a

¹¹⁹ Rosenwald, F., Demay, V., Duquet-Métayer, C., & Jouvenceau, M. (2021). *Repères et références statistiques sur les enseignements, la formation et la recherche 2021*. (French only)

¹²⁰ OCDE (2021): *Education at a glance*

¹²¹ See: https://publication.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/eesr/10EN/EESR10EN_Annexe_1-students_enrolled_in_higher_education.php

¹²² Musselin, C. (2017). *La grande course des universités*. Presses de Sciences Po. (French only)

¹²³ The student-teacher ratio is defined as the number of positions allocated to institutions (professors, teachers and technical and administrative staff) per 100 students.

¹²⁴ Calviac, S. (2019).). *Universities' funding: Evolution and challenges*. *Revue française d'administration publique*, 169, 51-68.

major impact on teacher researchers' working conditions, who see their workload increase while facing more precarious employment.

Unequal Allocation of Public Spending

There is also another trend in progress in France, i.e. major discrepancies in financial resources according to the different types of establishments, courses, diplomas and specializations. Recent data suggest that one student in a preparatory class costs 50% more to the State than one University student. Yet, this gap is detrimental to certain disadvantaged segments of the population: while children of workers and employees account for 28.5 % of total students, they represent 18.2% of CPGE students and are therefore underrepresented.¹²⁵ Conversely, children of *cadres* or of parents with higher intellectual professions account for 34.2% of the student population and 52.1% of CPGE students, showing over-representation of the latter in tracks that are favoured by public funding. And these inequalities will not disappear any time soon: since 2013, the gaps between the different existing tracks have tended to widen.¹²⁶ As mentioned above, French Higher Education enrolment has strongly increased in recent history, but this rise has not been compensated by a sufficient increase in spending (even though there was an increase). The significant increase in student enrolment from 2013 to 2019 (+10.2%) has not been offset by an increase in total expenditure, which has been quite limited (+1.2%). This mismatch between needs and means has led to a sharp decline in expenditure per university student (-12.6%). Quite the opposite has happened for students in preparatory classes or in STS programs: since 2013, the limited increase in enrolment (+6.0%) has been more than offset by a significant increase in expenditure (+12.6%). The cost per student therefore rose (+1.0%) from 2013 to 2019, thereby widening inequality between the different tracks of French Higher Education. These funding gaps are due to different supervision rates: "There are 3.5 teacher researchers for 100 undergraduate university students compared to 8.9 in DUT and 9 in engineering schools, which means that supervision rates are twice as high".¹²⁷

¹²⁵ MENJS (2021): [Repères et références statistiques - RERS 2021](#). [Statistical reference points 2021] Chapter 6 'Students', section 6.16 'The social origin of students', table 1. (French only).

¹²⁶ Beretti, P.A. (2021) [Note d'information de la DEPP](#). [DEPP information note]. In 2019, the average cost per student is 11,530 euros, n° 21.21, MESRI-DEPP.

¹²⁷ Fack, G. & Huillery, E. (2021) : [Enseignement supérieur, pour un investissement plus juste et plus efficace](#). [Higher education: for a fairer and more efficient and more efficient investment]. CAE note no. 68. (French only)

Higher education institutions are also further differentiated by various “competitive” funding schemes (“Idex”¹²⁸, “I-SITE”¹²⁹...for universities): universities receive additional funds based on their performance, which is assessed according to different criteria such as their ability to develop partnerships with economic players and their competitiveness on the international level.

Beyond their contribution to the budget of higher education establishments, these funding schemes may have an impact on social segregation. It is clear that the institutions where social diversity is lower are also those that benefit from these excellence initiatives.¹³⁰ These additional funding programs, since they are based on “performance” criteria, take priority over social inclusion objectives. At no time are the efforts to promote social diversity or to support the most disadvantaged or discriminated students taken into account.

Private Funding and Tuition Fees

While the share of public funding in Higher Education has declined (-3.2 percentage points between 2010 and 2019¹³¹), the share of businesses and households, which are two private actors, has increased (+1.8 percentage points for businesses and +1.4 for households).¹³² Moreover, as outlined above, private higher education is growing dramatically in France, which, combined with high tuition fees, places a significant financial burden on students and their families. This is also true for certain public establishments, such as Sciences Po Paris and the University of Paris Dauphine.

For the 2022/2023 academic year, at Sciences Po Paris, the ladder of tuition fees ranges from €0 to €13,190 per year for the Bachelor’s degree, and from €0 to €18,260 per year for the Master’s degree. On average, in 2020/2021, students paid €5,350 for the Bachelor’s degree and €6,750 for the Master’s degree, with 35% of students exempt from paying tuition fees.¹³³ While in 2005, income from tuition

¹²⁸ By Initiative d’Excellence

¹²⁹ By Initiative Science-Innovation-Territoires-Économie

¹³⁰ Avouac, R., & Harari-Kermadec, H. (2021). *French Universities – A Melting Pot or a Hotbed of Social Segregation? A Measure of Polarisation within the French University System (2007-2015)*, *Économie et Statistique*, 528(1), 63-84.

¹³¹ While in 2010 the share pertaining to the State, public administrations and local authorities in initial education expenditure for higher education was 83.7%, it gradually decreased to reach 80.5% in 2019. See Rosenwald, F., & Jouvenceau, M. (2021). *L’état de l’école 2021* (French only)

¹³² MESRI (2021). *L’état de l’Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l’Innovation en France* [The context of higher education, research and innovation in France (French only)], no. 14, Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation

¹³³ See the Sciences Po Paris website: *Étudier à Sciences Po, combien ça coûte ?* [How much does it cost to study at Sciences Po?] (French only).

fees accounted for 8% of Sciences Po's budget, it represented 32% of its budget in 2016.¹³⁴ At Dauphine, tuition fees range from €0 to €2,280 for most Bachelor's degrees and from €0 to €6,630 for almost all Master's degrees.¹³⁵ Both institutions use a modulated ladder of fees which takes into account students' household revenue and therefore make an effort to support social equity. In order to compensate for the increase in tuition fees, Sciences Po has rolled out various financial aid programs for the most disadvantaged students. However, it should be noted that at Sciences Po and, to a lesser extent, at Dauphine, this increase in tuition fees has led to a drop in the number of students that find themselves in between scholarship students and students from the highest-income families. Students in the top tiers of the ladder are not "disadvantaged enough" to be exempt from tuition fees but may not be able to afford them either.

Insufficient aid to fill gaps between students

The increase in tuition fees makes student aid a priority concern.

The French regime can be described as "conservative", with low tuition fees on average, but also more constrained financial aid programs compared to other countries, where higher education institutions apply much higher¹³⁶ or no fees¹³⁷.¹³⁸ In 2018/2019, 745,000 students received at least State financial aid, i.e., 39.5% of students. In 2019/2020, this share reached 41.9%, partly due to the COVID-19 financial assistance program for students who faced a drastic drop in their income and students from the overseas departments who could not leave Mainland France.¹³⁹ In 2019/2020, excluding student social security coverage, State financial aid to students amounted to €5.7 billion. This amount is the sum of three main types of aid: direct budget aid (67.4%), indirect budget aid (8.5%) and tax incentives (2.8%).

Among all student financial aid programs, scholarships based on social criteria are the main item of expenditure for the French Government. The annual amount of such scholarships varies according to

¹³⁴ Cour des Comptes (2018). *Les droits d'inscription dans l'enseignement supérieur public*. [Tuition fees in public higher education] (French only)

¹³⁵ See: <https://dauphine.psl.eu/en/training/school/tuition-fees>

¹³⁶ This refers to 'liberal' countries like England, with high fees but a much more developed loan system than in France, which is marked by massive student debt

¹³⁷ Here we refer to social democratic regimes, with high public funding, no tuition fees and high subsidies, such as Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

¹³⁸ Moulin, L. (2015). *Higher Education Enrolment Fees and Welfare State Regimes: A Comparative Analysis*, *Éducation et sociétés*, 36, 119-141.

¹³⁹ MESRI (2021). *The context of higher education, research and innovation in France (French only)*, no. 14.

household income and expenses, following national guidelines. In 2019/2020, 718,000 students received a state scholarship based on social criteria, which represents 37% of students in higher education programs providing access to such scholarships.¹⁴⁰

It is important to note the unequal distribution of these scholarships, reflecting social inequalities within Higher Education itself and unequal educational offerings under the supervision of the MESRI. Scholarship students are overrepresented in the overseas departments (52–65%). In Mainland France, while the share of scholarship students varies between 45 and 50% in Limoges and Montpellier, only a quarter of students receive scholarships in Paris. Geographic location, however, is not the main factor in the distribution of scholarship students: education is also a key factor. Scholarship students are largely under-represented in business schools, where they represent only 12% of students, compared to 54% in STS programs. The share of scholarship students in engineering varies according to whether they study at universities (34%) or not (23%). This leads us to another differentiating factor, between the private sector and the public sector. Indeed, 21.8% of students in the private sector receive a scholarship based on social criteria, versus 39.4% in the public sector.

One question remains to be answered: how does such aid contribute to reducing the gap between the most disadvantaged and the most privileged students? The distributional effect of State financial aids is indeed a matter for debate. Young adults from the upper classes appear to be more likely to pursue higher education and to claim the most prestigious, but also the most expensive diplomas (in terms of public expenditure). For Bonneau and Grobon (quoted above)¹⁴¹, over 70% of inequalities in public spending on higher education are due to unequal access to higher education. Still according to Bonneau and Grobon, if we consider the savings made by households thanks to the tax benefit for a half-share in the family quotient, granted when one of the members of the tax household is a student, disparities in State financial aids are even greater. Although households at the bottom decile receive approximately €11,200 over 6 years versus €3,400 for the top decile, the tax benefit for a half-share amounts to €500 over 6 years for the bottom decile, versus €10,500 for the top decile. In addition, students from the poorest households receive an average of €2,400 per year in direct or indirect financial contributions from their parents, versus around €8,700 at the top of the income distribution. “Total spending (public and private expenditure) amounts to €73,100 for young people whose parents are in the top 10 percent of the income distribution, compared to €29,100 for the bottom 10 percent.

¹⁴⁰ Papagiorgiou, H. (2020), *Flash Note no. 18*, MESRI-SIES.

¹⁴¹ Bonneau, C., Grobon, S. (2021). *Enseignement supérieur: un accès inégal selon le revenu des parents*. [Higher education: unequal access according to parental income] CAE, Focus no 076-2021 (French only)

In other words, the top decile (private expenditure) invests per student the equivalent of what is spent by the State, which the less well off cannot afford.

Both authors therefore conclude that “while public transfers for students are well targeted at the bottom of the income distribution, their amounts do not compensate for differences in parental transfers”. That said, even if it may seem impossible to close these gaps, it also appears that public spending in the form of financial aid, granted to the most deprived students, is not enough for them. The most recent report from the French Court of Auditors¹⁴² stressed that the precarious economic situation of students was particularly worrying, even before the pandemic.

Conclusion

The right to Higher Education is a fundamental right provided by numerous international human right treaties ratified by France. These stipulate that States shall ensure equal access to Higher Education on the basis of individual capacity, without any discrimination, and that higher education shall be made progressively free of charge.

Drawing on research conducted by the Right to Education Initiative in partnership with academic researchers and university students, this paper illustrates some of the challenges facing States *vis-à-vis* their obligations related to higher education. The case of France, where the higher education system is generally accessible and inclusive, highlights that the full realization of the right to higher education is far from obvious.

Indeed, the studies covered in this paper show the persistence of inequalities, including inequalities of access based on socio-economic background and place of origin/residence. The impact of such inequalities is exacerbated by the organization of the French higher education system, with a clear distinction between universities and *Grandes Écoles*, more or less selective admission processes depending on tracks and courses, and large differences in tuition fees. Tuition fees are much higher in the most selective establishments, which, however, are renowned and socially valued in the job market. They are also much higher in private higher education institutions. However, the number of

¹⁴² Cour des Comptes (2022). [2022 Annual public report of Cour des comptes](#).

private institutions and the number of students enrolled are constantly increasing. It is also important to note the unequal distribution of higher education establishments on the French territory, with significant disparities across regions depending on tracks and courses. These disparities perpetuate regional inequalities and, as a result, their impact on present and future generations. Students who need to move away from their place of origin in order to access Higher Education, because they live far from key educational centres (especially Paris), must face additional costs. Indirect costs related to higher education (mobility, housing, transportation, food, etc.), which vary greatly depending on living standards across regions, thus widen already existing socio-economic and regional inequalities. Students whose place of origin is far from these educational centres and students from low-income households are penalized.

The privatization of Higher Education in France leads to greater inequalities, especially since, despite an overall increase in the budget for Higher Education, spending is unevenly distributed and funding per student is falling.

In the end, the most privileged students receive the highest amount of funding, while the amount of financial aid which is granted to disadvantaged students is insufficient to bridge funding gaps between students.

“Challenging mainstream theories according to which higher education is a lever for social mobility, the research demonstrates that the very legal mechanisms and institutions that are supposed to ensure equality in opportunities in life can, conversely, reinforce social inequality and frustrate any chances of social mobility.”

(Roman Zinigrad, 2021)¹⁴³

The French State, which has ratified numerous human rights treaties recognizing the right to education, has the obligation to implement the right to higher education. Internally, the French State must also fulfil its constitutional duty to organize a Higher Education system that is free and accessible to all.¹⁴⁴ The analysis developed in this report shows that inequalities based on socio-economic background and place of origin/residence are a form of discrimination as defined by international human rights law and raise questions about the constitutional duty of the French State to equal access

¹⁴³ Right to Education Initiative, Round Table: [Right to Higher Education - the impact of place of origin and cost of studies in the realisation of the right to higher education in France](#), 3 June 2021 (French only)

¹⁴⁴ Article 13 of the [Preamble to the Constitution of 1946](#).

for children and adults to instruction and vocational training. The study also reveals that the privatization of Higher Education increases inequalities, thereby maintaining already strong disparities in educational opportunities and/or academic performances in French tertiary education for certain groups of society. This is especially evident for the most marginalized students, which is contrary to article 13 of ICESCR (paragraph 30 of General Comment No. 13 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Abidjan Principles, Principle 48).¹⁴⁵ Eventually, the report shows that the share of public funding per student has been in constant decline for six consecutive years, which is an unjustified regressive measure that is contrary to international law.

Admittedly, France has implemented a series of measures aimed at reducing inequalities and ensuring equal conditions of access, treatment and success for all, without discrimination.¹⁴⁶ In some respects, the public policies implemented by the French State have provided resources to support disadvantaged students and bridge certain discriminatory gaps in access to Higher Education. However, despite France's efforts, the most marginalized students continue to be underrepresented in Higher Education, especially in the most prestigious and renowned establishments providing access to the best job opportunities.

¹⁴⁵ <https://abidjan-principles.squarespace.com/en/principles/overview>

¹⁴⁶ In particular, the adoption of quota policies integrated into Parcoursup; a mobility grant of €500 for high school students in metropolitan France pursuing higher education in a region other than that in which they completed their secondary education; the creation of the *Passeport Mobilité Études* benefiting students from overseas departments and regions; the creation of the 1 young person, 1 mentor programme; the creation and implementation of the Connected Campuses; the expansion of the *Cordées de la réussite* programme