

France's State-Promoted Boom in For-Profit Higher Education

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For-profit higher education in France has grown rapidly, not simply because of demand, but because public policy has enabled it. The expansion has been driven by apprenticeship funding, permissive regulation, and limited scrutiny. Many of the main providers are owned by private equity investors, and the sector's size likely lies closer to the upper end of existing public estimates.

For-profit higher education in France has expanded rapidly over the past decade, reaching around 15 percent of the student population today. This is not simply the result of unmet student demand or entrepreneurial initiative; it is largely a product of public policies. As we show in a [2026 *Studies in Higher Education* article](#), the French state helped create the conditions for its rapid expansion by directing large volumes of public money toward apprenticeship-based higher education while imposing limited oversight from the institutions that benefited from this support.

A policy-driven expansion

The key turning point was the 2018 apprenticeship reform. Initiated by the Ministry of Labour, the reform reorganized funding so that money increasingly followed students enrolled in apprenticeship programs. In principle, apprenticeship can serve useful goals by linking study and work. In practice, the reform also created strong incentives for institutions to recruit large numbers of students into publicly funded programs.

The scale of this shift was remarkable. Apprenticeship contracts rose sharply, and much of the increase came from higher education. A large share of this expansion took place outside the traditional public university sector. For-profit institutions were particularly well positioned to benefit because they were often faster than public institutions in opening programs; adapting their course portfolios; and marketing themselves in vocational fields such as business, communication, design, information technology, and the arts.

This growth was therefore not just demand-led; it was facilitated by the French government. By making public support more directly tied to student recruitment in apprenticeship tracks, the reform turned higher education into an attractive market for expansion. That is why the French case should not be read as a spontaneous rise of private provision. The government helped fuel it.

Public money, unevenly distributed

The rise of for-profit higher education is even more striking when placed alongside the recent financial situation of public

institutions. While governments were channeling massive support into apprenticeship, public universities were operating under tighter constraints.

The result was a paradox. At the very moment when public higher education faced sustained pressure, new public resources were being deployed through a mechanism that strongly benefited alternative providers. It created a policy environment in which for-profit institutions could grow quickly while public institutions remained structurally constrained.

This matters because it changes how the expansion should be interpreted. The growth of for-profit higher education in France was not simply a private-sector success story. It was linked to the reorientation of public spending.

Private equity in the background

Another important feature of the sector is that, for the most part, the main for-profit providers are backed by private equity funds. This is crucial to understanding both the speed of expansion and the opacity of the sector. Private equity-backed groups have access to capital, can scale quickly through acquisitions and branding, and are strongly incentivized to pursue growth. Our research estimates that around 86 percent of students enrolled in French for-profit higher education attend institutions owned, at least partially, by private equity investors.

These ownership structures also shape the character of the sector. The issue is not that institutions are private but that many are organized within investment strategies oriented toward financial returns. This does not by itself determine educational quality, but it does raise important questions about transparency and accountability when public funding flows into organizations structured around maximizing shareholder value.

Because many of these groups operate through layered corporate forms and private ownership structures, it is difficult to reconstruct how revenues are used, how profits are distributed, or how educational spending compares with marketing and communication costs. That lack of transparency is one of the defining features of the French case.

Limited scrutiny, limited visibility

The second major driver of the boom has been the weakness of oversight. France does not have a comprehensive system for tracking and regulating higher education. Public universities are visible in official datasets and have to go through long-established evaluation frameworks. Many private providers are not.

Institutions seeking apprenticeship funding must satisfy certain administrative requirements set by the Ministry of Labour, but these are not equivalent to robust academic quality assurance. In practice, the relevant certifications often verify processes rather than teaching quality, learning conditions, or academic standards. This creates a permissive environment in which institutions can present themselves as publicly recognized while facing only limited scrutiny as higher education actors.

The consequences are both regulatory and statistical. Official estimates suggest that between 8 and 15 percent of higher education students in France are enrolled in for-profit institutions. That unusually wide range reflects not just measurement difficulties but a deeper governance problem: the absence of a unified system capable of making the sector fully visible.

The invisible students

Our research addresses this blind spot by compiling self-reported enrollment figures from the main for-profit providers operating in France. The resulting estimate is around 450,000 students. That places the sector closer to the upper bound of existing public estimates.

Even if this figure remains approximate, its significance is clear. For-profit higher education in France is no longer marginal. It has become a major part of the system, educating hundreds of

thousands of students, many through publicly funded apprenticeship pathways. Yet these students remain only partially visible in administrative data and public debate.

That invisibility matters. It becomes harder to know who is studying where, under what conditions, and with what educational outcomes. It also becomes harder to evaluate the use of public money. The state can count apprenticeship contracts more easily than it can assess the educational experience attached to them.

A policy blind spot

The deeper problem is not only the scale of the sector, but also the weakness of policy evaluation. Public discussion has focused overwhelmingly on quantitative success: the number of apprentices, the number of contracts, and the promise of employability. Much less attention has been paid to what students are actually learning, what forms of higher education are being expanded, and how public funding is reshaping the institutional landscape.

This is the central lesson of the French case. For-profit higher education expanded because government policy made it attractive and because oversight remained too weak to track its development clearly. Large amounts of public funding encouraged rapid growth. Limited scrutiny allowed that growth to occur without adequate transparency or educational evaluation. In a period when public institutions themselves were under financial strain, that combination proved especially powerful.

France's boom in for-profit higher education should therefore be understood not as a secondary development at the margins of the system but as a state-promoted transformation at its center. It is a reminder that private expansion in higher education is often built not against the state, but through it.

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