



## ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION UK

**Katarina Sokić<sup>1i</sup>,**

**Sarwar Khawaja<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Dr., Research Associate,  
Oxford Business College,  
65 George Street, Oxford,  
United Kingdom

[orcid.org/0000-0001-7522-1228](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7522-1228)

<sup>2</sup>Chairman of Business Development,  
Oxford Business College,  
65 George Street, Oxford,  
United Kingdom

### **Abstract:**

Our study examined some aspects of entrepreneurship in private higher education in the UK. The growing value of the private higher education sector in the UK represents an opportunity for entrepreneurial investment. For this purpose, we analysed the available data from the 2015/16 to 2017/18 academic years as well as data published online in HESA's *Statistical Bulletin Higher Education Student Statistics: Alternative Providers*. The data show that the total number of students grew in the observed period and the largest increase was recorded in postgraduate students. Among the students enrolled with private providers, 38% were 30 years and over in 2017/18. However, the number of younger undergraduate students is growing year on year. One of the most significant features of the private sector is low enrolment rates for students with government-supported tuition fee loans. The majority of privately-funded higher education providers operate as for-profit organisations, and one of the key factors in developing and strengthening this sector is to attract foreign capital investment and new domestic and foreign students, whilst maintaining a high quality and diverse range of study programs.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship, private higher education, UK

### **1. Purpose**

The main aim of this study is to examine the entrepreneurial conditions in private higher education in the UK and to assess the key factors of entrepreneurship development in the private higher education sector in the UK.

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [katarina.sokic@oxfordbusinesscollege.ac.uk](mailto:katarina.sokic@oxfordbusinesscollege.ac.uk)

## 2. Introduction

Until recently, higher education in the UK was confined to the public sector whereby higher education took place at universities and college (Hunt & Bolivier, 2019a). The private higher education sector in the United Kingdom also now has a notable role to play and consists mainly of colleges for professional development and professional training in various fields, such as accounting, psychotherapy, law, design, arts, etc. CGHE's research (2019) indicates that over half of the UK's private providers offer courses in business and administration (56%), health and social care (20%) and creative arts and design (14%).

However, the relatively low number of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) courses is noticeable: only 7% of providers offer computer science courses; engineering and technology courses are offered by 6% of providers and fewer than 1% of private providers offer courses in mathematics (CGHE, 2019). Given that STEM programmes teach the skills required for the technological development of the global community (Kara, Tonin, & Vlassopoulos, 2021), it would be desirable for private providers to recognise this educational trend and increase their competitiveness in the education sector.

Hunt and Boliver (2019) point out that data concerning the actual number of students at private higher education institutions in the UK are unknown, as most private providers did not respond to the survey (response rates are typically around 40%). According to the available data from 2016/17, there were 58,735 students at private higher education institutions, representing around 2 per cent of the total student population in the UK: 2,564,470 (HESA, 2018a).

Similarly, the reasons why so many private higher education institutions (prHEIs) fail shortly after being founded and the causes of high dropout rates among undergraduate students at prHEI's are also unknown.

In the last three decades, higher education around the world has been transformed from a "mass" to a "universal" system available to a wide range of students, with the help of financial support and easier entry into the country of study (Calderon, 2018). Official recent data show that, over the past three years, interest in higher education has grown significantly despite the challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic and shutdowns. The Office for Budget Responsibility of the United Kingdom has projected an increase of 100,000 in the number of home (UK) students between 2019 and 2021 (Hillman, 2018).

We can already clearly see that the post-pandemic recession will stimulate interest in higher education. Consequently, it is also reasonable to expect a growing interest in investment opportunities in the private higher education sector and its subsequent expansion.

## 3. The impact of current societal changes on the higher education sector in the UK

According to the Deloitte report, among the key trends affecting the education sector in UK nowadays are the growth of consumerism, shrinking profitability margins,

increasing competition, shifting industry requirements and the unknown impact of Brexit (Deloitte, 2020). For the purposes of this paper, we will consider shrinking profitability margins and shifting industry requirements. On the one hand, the higher education sector faces government restrictions on tuition fees, squeezing educational institutions' profit margins. At the same time, fixed costs related to investments in competitive and well-equipped campuses are rising. The result is a reduction in variable costs and rising numbers of part-time academic staff.

Since the labour market is focused on lifelong learning, employees are a potential source of investment for employers. The benefits of lifelong learning are myriad for employees (e.g. wage growth and job security), employers (e.g. increased profitability) and society at large (e.g. increased tax revenues) (UK Government, 2017).

According to the UNESCO's *Institute of Statistics* data on international students (UNESCO, 2021), the United Kingdom is the second most popular education destination globally after the United States, with the number of international students increasing year on year (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). The growth rate in the period 2015-2018 was 4.9 percent, amounting to 21,245 more international student enrolments (UNESCO, 2021).

This positive trend continued during the Covid-19 pandemic: the number of international students in the UK in 2020 was 551,495 - an increase of 5.2% compared to 2019 when the total number of international students in the UK amounted to 524,250 (Project Atlas, 2020<sup>ii</sup>). It is also important to note that, despite concerns about the impact of Brexit, the number of international students has in fact increased in recent years.

At the same time, the USA continues to be the most desirable destination for foreign students. In the 2019/20 academic year, there were more than one million international student enrolments in the US (1,075,496), which represented an increase of 7% compared to the previous two years (Open Doors, 2020<sup>iii</sup>).

Recent data from the *Higher Education Statistics Agency* (HESA statistics, 2021) reported an increase of 60,310 foreign student enrolments in the UK between 2018/19 and 2019/20. Most of these students came from outside the European Union. China is among the top 10 sending countries to the UK. In 2019/20, 35% of all non-EU students were from China, which represented an increase of 51,140 (or 56%) over the five-year period between 2015/16 and 2019/20. In second place were students coming to study in the UK from India, which represented 14% of all non-EU enrolments in the year 2019/20, while

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<sup>ii</sup> Project Atlas®. was launched in 2001 by the INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION as a global research initiative that disseminates comparable student mobility data, conducts studies on academic migration and the internationalization of higher education, and provides customized workshops and research to strengthen the collection of mobility data around the world. The initiative has been supported by the Ford Foundation, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the United States Department of State, IIE, and country partners. <https://www.iie.org/projectatlas>

<sup>iii</sup> Open Doors® Report on International Educational Exchange was published on November 16th, 2020, by representatives of the U.S. State Department, the Office of Education and Culture, and the Institute for International Education. This annual publication is a comprehensive information resource on international students and scholars in the United States and American students studying abroad for academic credit. <https://iiebooks.stores.yahoo.net/opdo20pr1.html>

students coming from the USA were in third place. For comparison, in 2018/19, the number of HE students from India was 26,685 and the number from the USA was 20,120.

The number of first year students from other European Union countries increased between 2017/18 and 2018/19. In the 2019/20 academy year, most EU students come from Italy, followed by France, while Romania replaced Germany in third position. In the period 2014/15 to 2018/19, the number of students from Spain and Poland increased, while in the same period, the number of students from Germany and Greece saw a slight decline.

In line with this trend, the UK government has recently updated its 2019 *International Education Strategy* with the aim of increasing the value of UK education exports to £35 billion by hosting at least 600,000 foreign students a year by 2030 (UK Government, 2021).

#### 4. Literature Review

Funding for higher education in the 21st century is characterised by an increasing reliance on the private sector as a source of funding from entrepreneurs, businesses, foundations, philanthropists, banks, etc. Levels of public funding in many countries with developed market economies are not sufficient to finance higher education, especially when it comes to creating a differentiated system of vocational education. Therefore, the success of higher education is largely dependent on private sector investment. According to data from the OECD, the United Kingdom had the second highest ratio of private to public expenditure on higher education among all European countries (IHEP<sup>iv</sup>, 2007).

Research by *The Centre for Global Higher Education* (CGHE) conducted during the second half of 2017 (a web-based survey) confirmed that there were 813 private higher education providers in the UK at the time. It is important to note here that half of the private HE providers that existed in 2014 had ceased operations three years later (a total of 363 institutions).

It was recorded that 45% of those providers that were established in 2014 and had ceased operations in 2017 were deleted from the Companies House register, almost twenty percent of them disappeared without a trace, and a third still operate but no longer provide services in higher education (CGHE, 2019). These data are a significant indicator of the instability of the private higher education sector in the UK, which raises concerns about why so many private education providers went out of business.

The demographic characteristics of students attending private higher education institutions highlight certain differences compared to students in the public sector.

The results of the research (CGHE, 2019; Shury et al. 2016) showed that students in the private sector are on average older (60% are under 30) than those in the public sector (80% are under 30). Furthermore, half of the student population in the private sector are from ethnic minorities, while in the public sector, a fifth are students come from ethnic minorities. Gender representation in both sectors is equal and balanced.

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<sup>iv</sup> Institute for Higher Education Policy

The highest concentration of private providers in the UK is in England (88%), followed by Scotland (3%) and Wales (2.4%).

According to 2019 data, almost fifty per cent of private providers were in London, which is consistent with previous data (Hughes, et al. 2013) according to which almost half of all private higher education institutions were in the capital, London.

More than a quarter of all private providers were registered as limited companies (Ltd.), 21% used the title 'college', while only nine providers had the legally protected organisational title 'university' (five) or 'university college' (four) (CGHE, 2019).

According to the Companies House/Charities register, 70% of private providers in higher education are for-profit organisations, of which 2% have held charitable status, while 28% were registered as non-profit enterprises, of which 22% had charitable status.

Between 2011 and 2014, the number of private higher education providers in the UK increased significantly from 674 to 732 (an increase of 20%) (Shury et al., 2016). According to the available data (Fielden & Middlehurst, 2011), the majority were small providers: only 35 of them had more than 1000 students and only five had more than 5,000 (Hughes, Porter, Jones, & Sheen, 2013).

According to CGHE (2019), almost two-thirds (68%) of the UK's private higher education providers are for-profit companies without charitable status, and about one-fifth (22%) are not-for-profit with charitable status. This study shows that only 10% of for-profit providers without charitable status are 36 years or older, while 54% of for-profit providers with charitable status are of the same age. Just under half of the for-profit providers without charitable status (39%) are no more than eleven years old, and 28% of them are between 12 and 19 years old.

In efforts to assess the impact of universities on economic growth, Valero & Reenen (2019) developed a new dataset of universities using the World Higher Education Database (WHED), which includes 1,500 regions in 78 countries in the period of university expansion since 1950. The results of our regression analyses showed a positive relationship between university presence and economic growth: a 10% increase in the number of universities was associated with a 0.4% increase in GDP per capita in a region. Based on the actual number of universities in the UK regions in 2010 (171 universities in 10 regions), the authors calculated that the total GDP growth per capita would be around 0.7% if the number of universities increased by 6%. Additionally, this study showed that the economic benefits of expanding higher education institutions would outweigh the costs.

Studies conducted in the UK have shown that university research has a direct, positive effect on corporate patenting in smaller, local firms but that corporate patenting in large firms is not associated with research activities in nearby universities (Helmets & Rogers, 2015). Abramovsky & Simpson (2011) examined whether companies locate their research and development (R&D) departments near university research departments and whether research and development companies located closer to universities are more likely to collaborate with them (either formally or informally). Their analysis was based on 117 postcode areas in the UK. The results of the study showed that the impact of university research is greater on small firms located within a 10 km radius of research

departments, while the authors found no statistically significant correlation between university research and large-firm patenting. Therefore, location itself does not play a critical role in connecting businesses with university research departments (Abramovsky & Simpson, 2011).

As part of the International Education Strategy 2021 (IES), the Department of International Trade (DIT) has committed to supporting independent institutions in accessing international opportunities, connecting providers to investors. Revenue generated from exports from UK independent schools has increased year on year since 2010. These exports were worth £630 million in 2010 and had reached £1.0 billion by 2018 (UK Government, 2021). One of the main goals of the IES is to develop investment opportunities in the UK education sector, and to this end, the Department of International Trade will develop investment offers and identify opportunities for the education sector. In contrast to publicly-funded higher education institutions, private higher institutions are small and specialised. Therefore, they are still not an alternative to the public sector (CFE Report, 2013). One of the key factors in the development and strengthening of the private education sector is foreign capital investment (Hunt & Boliver, 2019).

The UK government has recognised the potential of private higher education because it assumes that private higher education will lead to a “*greater choice of more innovative and quality products and services at lower cost*” (CFE Report, 2013, p. 8). Data suggested that the majority of privately-funded HE providers operate as for-profit organisations (Crossick, 2010; Middlehurst, & Fielden, 2011).

## 5. Research Design and Methods

Our research uses data collected between the 2015/16 and 2017/18 academic years, published online in the *HESA's Statistical Bulletin Higher Education Student Statistics: Alternative Providers, 2017/18* on 14 February 2019 (HESA<sup>v</sup>, 2019a). The data provided in this bulletin are the result of cooperation between the Department for Education, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government, and the Department for Economy Northern Ireland with support from the Office for Students. According to HESA's definition, “*alternative providers are higher education providers who do not receive recurrent funding from the Office for Students or other public body and who are not further education colleges.*”

Regarding private providers, data are available on the number of students and their socio-demographic characteristics, subjects studied and qualifications achieved. We hope that, in the future, this database will be supplemented by other relevant data similar to those collected on public higher education providers.

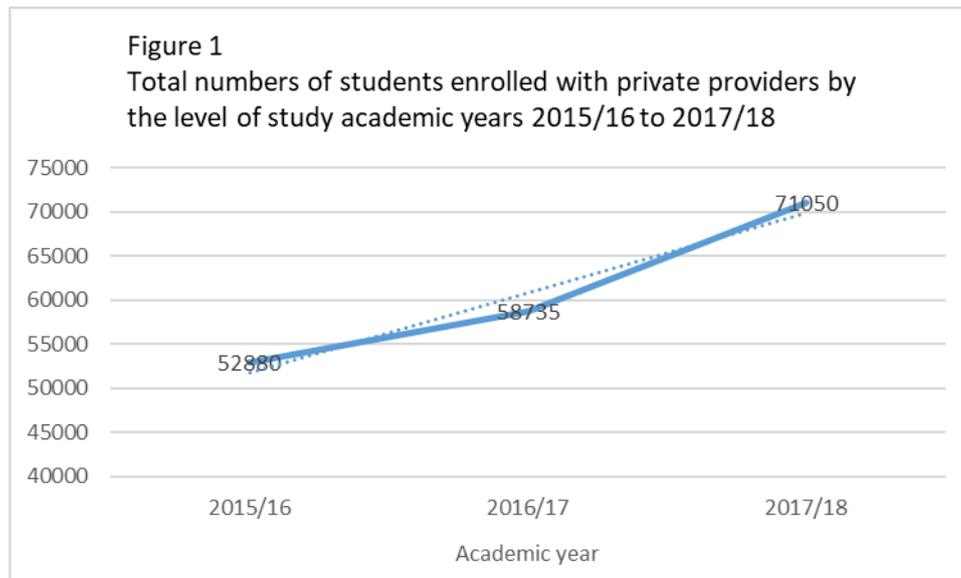
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<sup>v</sup> The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is the expert in UK higher education data. HESA collect data about higher education in the UK therefore it has a key role in supporting and strengthening the higher education sector. HESA has been collecting and statistically processing available data on private higher education providers in the UK for several years.

## 6. Results

In Table 1, we show descriptive statistics on the number of students enrolled with private providers by level of study in the 2015/16 to 2017/18 academic years.

The data show that there were 71,050 students enrolled on higher education courses with private providers in the 2017/18 academic year and that the total number of students grew over the observed period (Figure 1).



Source: HESA data 2017/18. Available at:

<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs/numbers>

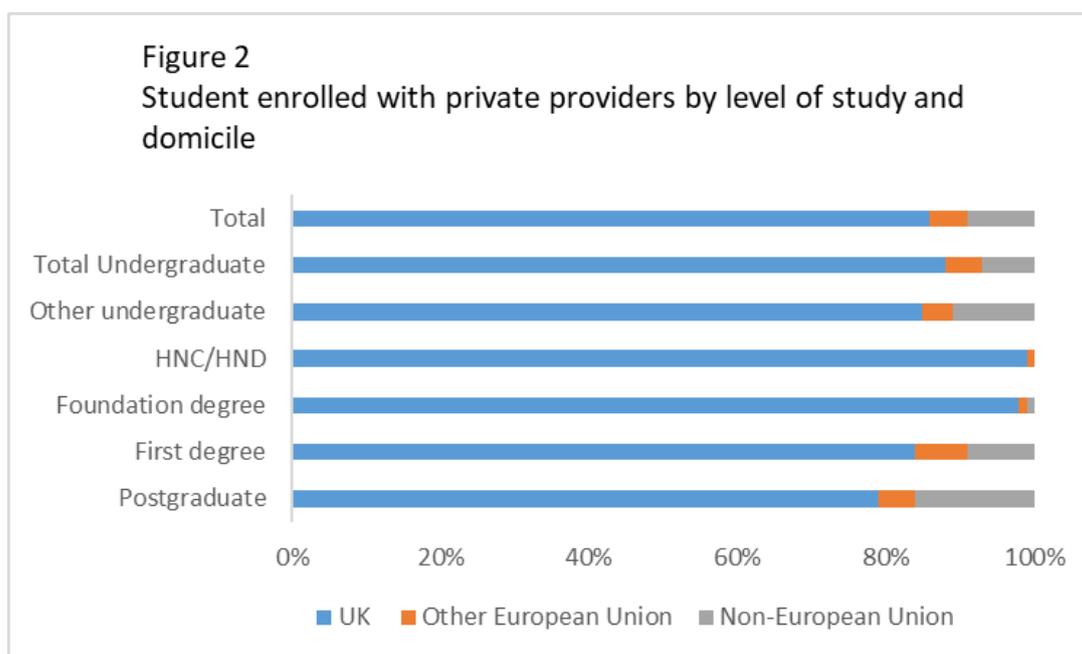
The largest increase can be observed in the number of postgraduate (master's) students, while the increase in undergraduate students is much lower. In 2017/18, private higher education institutions also saw enrolments from small numbers of doctoral and other postgraduate research students for the first time (a total of 30). However, some increases in student enrolments are due to an increase in the amount of data collected, rather than a true reflection of the total number of students. Therefore, care should be taken when comparing data over time (HESA, 2019b).

**Table 1:** The number of students enrolled with private providers by the level of study academic years 2015/16 to 2017/18

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
<b>Postgraduate</b>			
Doctorate research	0	0	30
Another postgraduate research	0	0	20
Total postgraduate research	0	0	50
Masters taught	0	6,805	11,000
Total postgraduate	0	6,805	15,055
<b>Undergraduate</b>			
First degree	31,815	32,685	35,085
Foundation degree	640	1,125	1,150

HNC/HND	16,030	14,150	13,980
Total undergraduate	52,880	51,930	55,995
<b>Total</b>	<b>52,880</b>	<b>58,735</b>	<b>71,050</b>
<b>Sources:</b> HESA. Available at: <a href="https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs/numbers">https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs/numbers</a>			

As we can see in Figure 2, UK students made up the largest proportion of enrolments in 2017/18. Among first-year students, 4% were from other European Union (EU) countries and 9% from non-EU countries. In 2017/18, there were 580 students from Italy and 575 students from China.



Source: HESA data 2017/18. Available at:  
<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs/location>

As Table 2 shows, students enrolled with private providers are equally balanced in terms of gender, with the number of female students growing at a faster rate compared to males over the years. The number of female students compared to males has increased over the years, which is in line with data for the public higher education sector. 50% of first-year degree students and 61% of postgraduate taught students were female. 38% of students enrolled with private providers were 30 years and over in 2017/18, similar to previous academic years. However, the number of younger undergraduate students grew year on year. In all three academic years, the vast majority of students (86 and 87 percent, respectively) were UK-domiciled students. Just under half were White, about 20% were Black and 12% were Asian.

**Table 2:** Personal characteristic of students enrolled with private providers by the level of study academic years 2015/16 to 2017/18

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	26,825	30,535	38,560
Male	26,025	28,160	32,435
Other	30	40	55
<b>Age</b>			
20 and under	12,240	12,860	13,435
21-30 years	18,620	22,510	30,415
30 years and over	22,015	23,360	27,200
Age unknown	5	5	0
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
White	20,550	24,370	31,350
Black	12,760	13,355	14,195
Asian	6,425	7,335	8,295
Mixed	1,660	2,090	2,445
Other	1,220	1,455	2,300
Not known	3,700	1,840	2,580
<b>Total UK domiciled students</b>			
	<b>46,315</b>	<b>50,450</b>	<b>61,160</b>
<b>Sources:</b> HESA. Available at: <a href="https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs/numbers">https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs/numbers</a>			

Table 3 shows data on participation characteristics. The data show that a higher proportion of undergraduate students were from low participation neighbourhoods in 2017/18 than students at all other undergraduate levels of study. Relatively fewer students enrolled with private providers were from low participation neighbourhoods in 2017/18 compared to students enrolled at publicly-funded higher education institutions.

**Table 3:** UK domiciled full time undergraduate's student enrolled with private providers by participation characteristics academic years 2015/16 to 2017/18

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
<b>State school marker</b>			
Privately funded school	2,185	2,465	1,895
State-funded school or college	25,865	26,640	28,555
Unknown or not applicable school type	11,350	10,500	12,355
<b>Low participation neighbourhood marker</b>			
Low participation neighbourhood (POLAR4)	2,275	2,395	2,705
Another neighbourhood (POLAR4)	36,995	36,985	39,785
Unknown neighbourhood (POLAR4)	125	175	240
<b>Total</b>	<b>39,400</b>	<b>39,605</b>	<b>42,805</b>
<b>Sources:</b> HESA. Available at: <a href="https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs/numbers">https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs/numbers</a>			

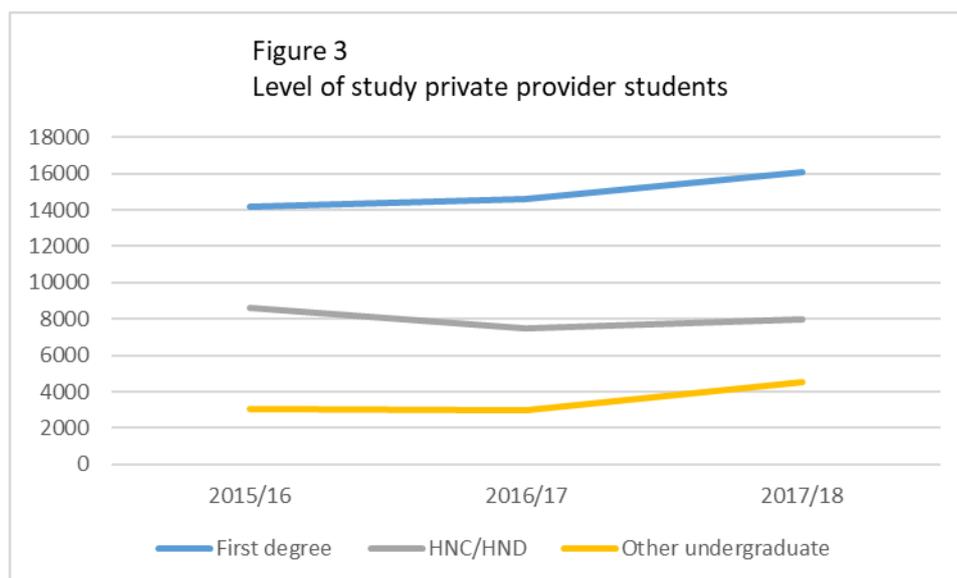
Table 4 shows courses by subject area across the private higher education sector from 2015/16 to 2017/18. As we can see, law and economics are the most highly represented,

followed by creative arts & design , while only 9% of students were studying any kind of science subject.

**Table 4:** Subjects area across the private sector in academic years 2015/16 to 2017/18

Subject Area	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Medicine & dentistry	0	5	15
Subjects allied to medicine	240	320	320
Biological sciences	90	135	285
Agriculture & related subjects	0	25	15
Mathematical sciences	0	10	15
Computer science	430	410	205
Engineering & technology	260	385	455
Architecture, building & planning	150	270	565
<b>Total science subject areas</b>	<b>1,170</b>	<b>1,565</b>	<b>1,875</b>
Social studies	645	980	695
Law	2,110	3,420	7,330
Business & administrative studies	6,295	7,765	6,890
Mass communications & documentation	145	140	180
Languages	5	30	25
Historical & philosophical studies	625	680	940
Creative arts & design	2,735	3,035	4,010
Education	190	300	390
<b>Total non-science subject areas</b>	<b>12,750</b>	<b>16,340</b>	<b>20,460</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,920</b>	<b>17,905</b>	<b>22,335</b>

Figure 3 indicates that undergraduate courses are the most popular type of course provided by alternative providers, with enrolments increasing year on year.



## 6.1 Implications and Contribution to Knowledge

The paper outlined the structure and characteristics of the private higher educational sector in the UK and presented data relating to subject area and recent trends. Due to a lack of reliable data from the private higher education sector, we used data from HESA, which has systematically produced relevant data since the 2015/16 academic year.

To stimulate the growth of the private higher education sector, institutions have been given degree-awarding powers. Despite these government efforts, the problem remains that data on the private higher education sector are not systematised. This means that there are several unknowns regarding capital structure, funding sources, costs, investment and profitability.

As noted above and in line with our results, there is growing interest in private higher education and the number of countries sending students to the UK is growing. Despite the pandemic and Brexit, the United Kingdom is still ranked as the most desirable European educational destination for international students. The UK government has recognised the competitive potential of the private higher education sector and in May 2016 published a strategic paper that sought to boost competition within the higher education sector and create a more flexible way of providing services to students (UK government, 2016).

One of the most significant causes of instability in the private sector is attributed to low enrolment rates of students relying on government-funded tuition fee loans (Hunt & Boliver, 2021).

It is reasonable to question the relationship between high drop-out rates among undergraduate students (Baker, 2017; HESA, 2018b) and ceased to operate private providers of higher education in the UK. Demographic parameters on students are likely to affect dropout rates in the private sector. It is reasonable to assume that many students over the age of 30 combine study-related commitments with full- or part-time work, which often requires a great deal of effort and self-motivation.

The results of some recent studies (Kruss et al., 2015; McGrath, Thondhlana, & Garwe, 2021; Tang, 2020) show that investing in the higher education system has a direct positive impact on socio-economic development across a wide range of countries. Many countries provide financial incentives to encourage cooperation between business and higher education institutions. The UK Government has recognised the importance of the link between higher education and research institutions and businesses, such that science and innovation form part of the Government's long-term economic plan (HM Treasury, 2014). Furthermore, recent research provides evidence of the transfer of knowledge and innovation from higher education institutions to the local economy in the UK regions, which could help to strengthen linkages between higher education institutions and local businesses.

Despite the challenges faced by the private higher education sector, private service providers meet labour market needs but are still not an alternative to the public higher education sector. To improve the competitiveness of this sector, foreign capital investments are necessary in order to attract traditional students.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

### About the Authors

**Dr. Katarina Sokić**, PhD in Psychology, MSc in Civil Law, Research Associate, Oxford Business College, 65 George Street, Oxford, United Kingdom.

**Sarwar Khawaja**, MBA, LL.M, Chairman Business Development, Oxford Business College, 65 George Street, Oxford, United Kingdom.

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