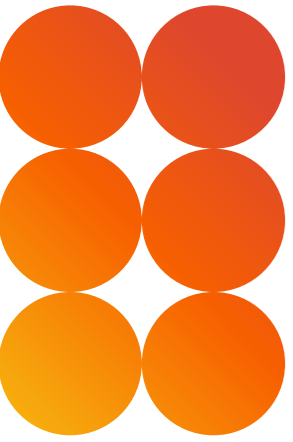




How higher education can drive economic growth in France





Executive summary

The French higher education sector has a crucial role to play in driving economic growth

France has a significant opportunity to enhance its economic landscape through focused efforts in four critical areas: re-skilling for the future workforce, attracting skilled labour to the country, boosting research innovation and a comprehensive plan for achieving ambitious recruitment goals.

The country faces a looming shortfall in highly-skilled workers

The national unemployment rate, which stood at 7.3% in 2023 is projected to rise to 7.8% by 2025 – significantly higher than the 5.5% average for OECD countries¹. A skilled talent shortage is on the horizon for France and adds to concerns that the country could face a 1.5 million shortfall in highly-skilled workers by 2030².

French institutions are well placed to strengthen graduate outcomes

Paris is already the sixth best student city in the world for graduate employment. The existing strengths of the sector have been pivotal in attracting greater numbers of international students to France, delivering stronger graduate outcomes than many international peers including Brazil, Germany, India, Spain and Switzerland.

¹ [Unemployment by Country 2024 \(worldpopulationreview.com\)](#)

² [FOWTalentCrunchFinal_Spring2018.pdf \(kornferry.com\)](#)

³ [Economic forecast for France – European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴ [France welcomes 412,000 international students \(thepienews.com\)](#)

The global competition for highly-skilled students and employees is intensifying

As economic growth is forecast to remain at 0.7% for the rest of 2024 and public debt set to increase to over 113% of the national GDP by 2025³, pressure is emerging for France to strategically identify sectors to enable economic growth and long-term stability. Given the growing competition globally to recruit international students, meeting the target of 500,000 inbound students by 2027⁴ will not be easy.

Maximising the strengths of the higher education sector for long-term economic growth

Combining the collective knowledge, insights and data from QS and the French higher education sector can enable institutions to deliver effective international recruitment strategies that draw on the priorities and motivations of specific source markets and the skills and research strengths of France, to close the recruitment gaps and deliver further volume growth in the long-term.

NB: Throughout this report, 'higher education institutions' refers to universities, Grandes écoles, business schools and other specialist higher education institutions.

Our recommendations

QS has identified four critical areas to drive French higher education's economic performance



Re-skilling for the future workforce

The QS Global Employer Survey highlights that the biggest skills gaps for French employers are emotional intelligence and communication. France must develop a skills and globalisation transformation plan to prepare for workplaces of the future.



Fostering research innovation and partnerships

The research opportunity for France is high – its research is achieving more citations per faculty than many counterparts in mainland Europe. France's research impact is most evident in specific subject areas including business, law, medicine and statistics. However, there is potential to elevate the impact of its research further in other subject areas.



Attracting highly-skilled people to France

Employability and graduate outcomes are some of the principal driving forces behind the strong performance of French institutions when benchmarked internationally. It is vital that institutions ensure that skills development in the classroom aligns with the needs of employers.



Reaching ambitious international recruitment targets

Reaching France's goal of attracting 500,000 international students by 2027 will require a 5% annual growth rate over the next 4 years⁵. The QS International Student Survey 2024 highlights the differing priorities for students globally, reiterating the importance of institutions to develop tailored recruitment strategies for individual countries.

⁵ [France sees a record rise in foreign students | Campus France](#)

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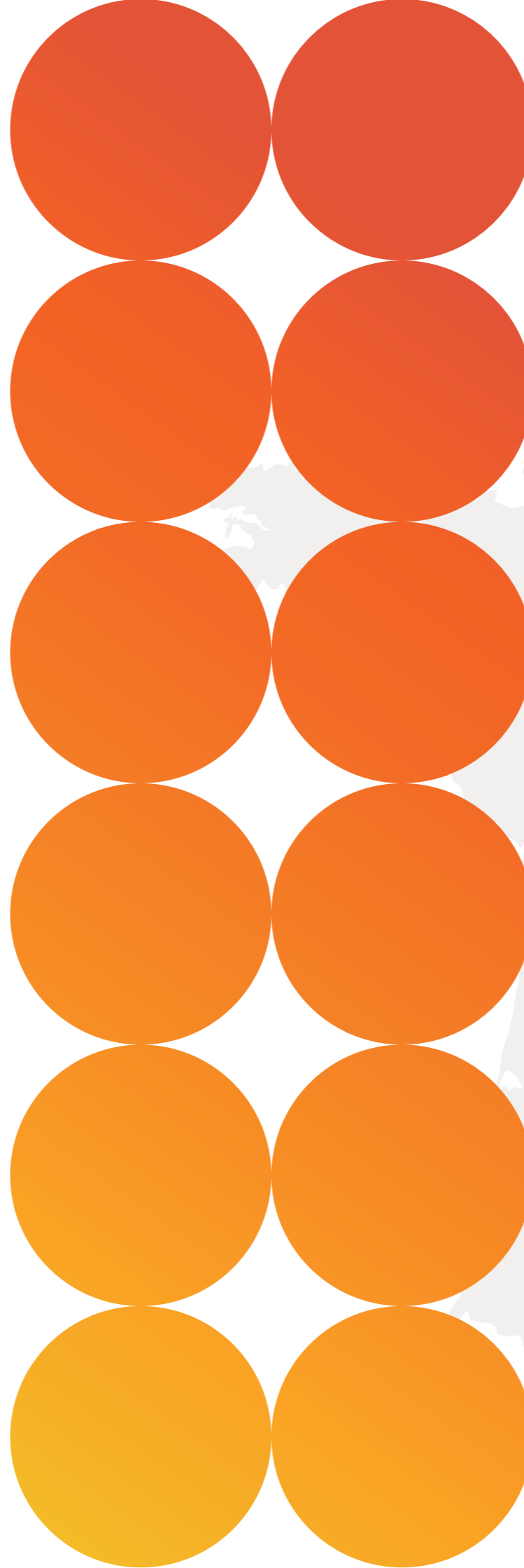
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rank in the world top 100 for at least one subject

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rank in the world top 50 for employer reputation

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French business schools rank in the QS Business Masters Rankings 2024

11

French business schools rank in the QS Global MBA Rankings 2024

392,630

international students (Campus France, 2023)

46,371

from Morocco

31,032

from Algeria

27,479

from China

2,576,270

domestic students (Campus France, 2023)

1,055,219

international research publications from French institutions (Scopus, 2019-2024)



Re-skilling for the future workforce

A skills-based transformation plan should be a key priority, with higher education at its heart.

France could lack 1.5 million highly-skilled workers by 2030⁶ and the impact of this labour shortage alone on the financial and business sector could amount to losses of \$60.8 billion USD⁷.

Data from QS supports these projections and reveals that three of the top five fastest growing occupations in France are within the financial and business sector, suggesting that these sectors could be most impacted by emerging skills deficits.



⁶ Skills shortages is weighing on the global economy | American Business School of Paris (absparis.com)

⁷ FOWTalentCrunchFinal_Spring2018.pdf (kornferry.com)

Problem-solving, teamwork and organisation are the most valuable skills.

QS data highlights that the most valuable soft skills for the fastest growing occupations are problem-solving, teamwork and organisational skills and reflect the most sought-after skills employers are looking for in their graduate hires.

Across these soft skills, French institutions are producing graduates who meet employer expectations, further reiterating the improvements made by those institutions to enhance their reputation amongst employers and to deliver strong graduate outcomes.

The biggest skills gaps for French employers are in the areas of emotional intelligence and communication, emphasising the importance of graduates being able to work well with others in their teams and an ability to communicate effectively. Emotional intelligence is an area where French graduates fall behind their international counterparts.

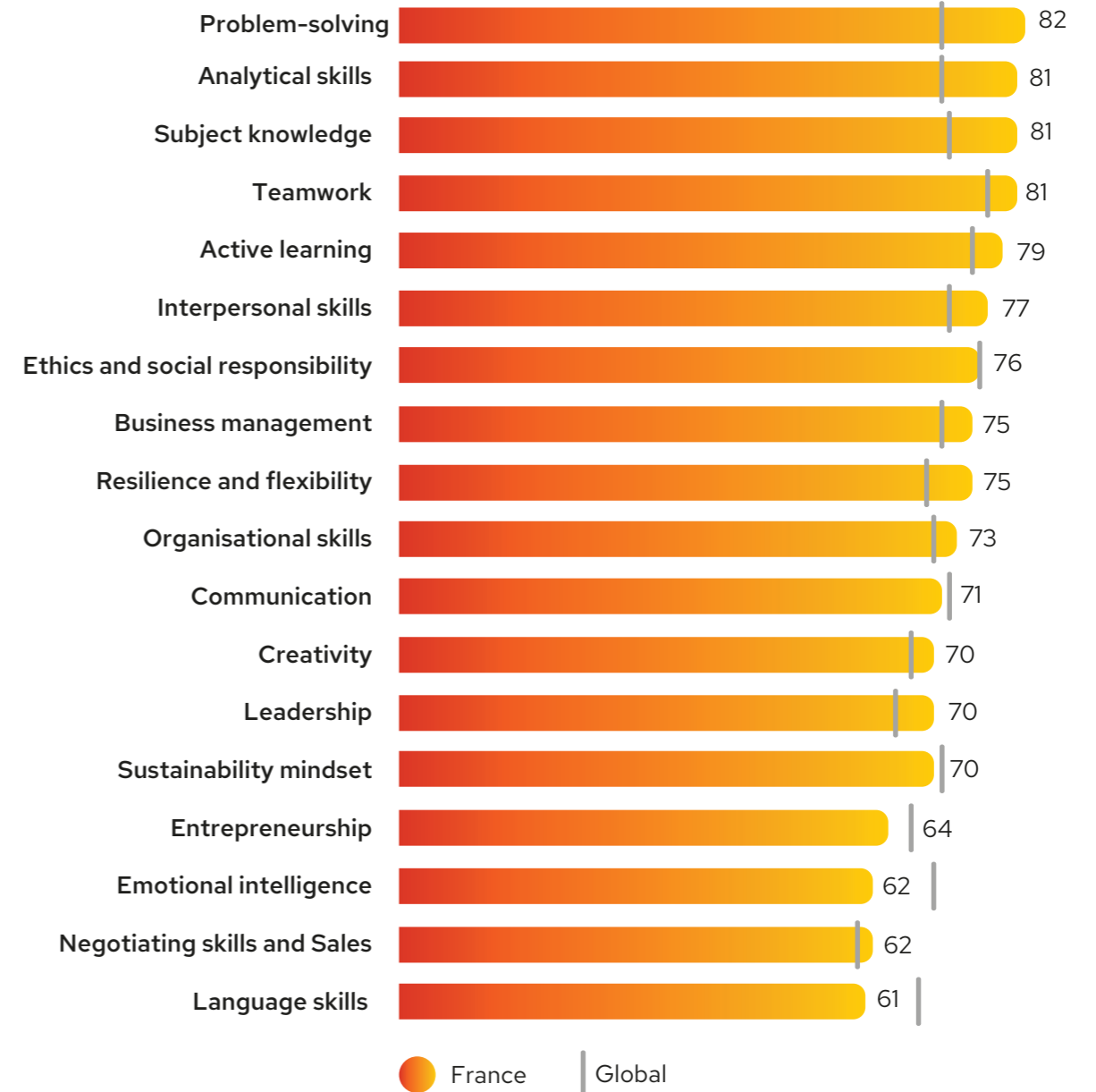
Most desired skills for top 10 fastest growing occupations in France

	Soft skills							Hard skills		
	Organisational	Problem solving	Teamwork	Communication	Project management	Self motivation	Leadership	Microsoft excel	Finance	Accounting
Financial auditor	●	●			●			●	●	●
Producer and director	●		●	●	●	●	●			
Financial manager	●	●					●	●	●	●
Supply chain manager	●	●	●		●		●	●		
Investment banker	●		●			●		●	●	●
Industrial engineer	●	●	●	●	●					
Loan officer	●	●							●	●
Computer systems engineer	●	●	●	●		●				
Network / computer systems administrator	●	●		●		●				
Business administrator	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		

● Indicates skill is desirable

Source: QS Employability Database

Employer satisfaction with graduate skills in France



Source: QS Global Employer Survey 2021 to 2024

To keep up with the pace of industry, French higher education institutions must ensure they provide students with the vital skills to become graduates with strong interpersonal skills who can proactively seek out solutions to day-to-day and society-wide problems.

Understanding industry skills gaps will help inform portfolio and curricula development for students. It is important to focus on the development of soft skills as much as hard skills as part of curriculum design.



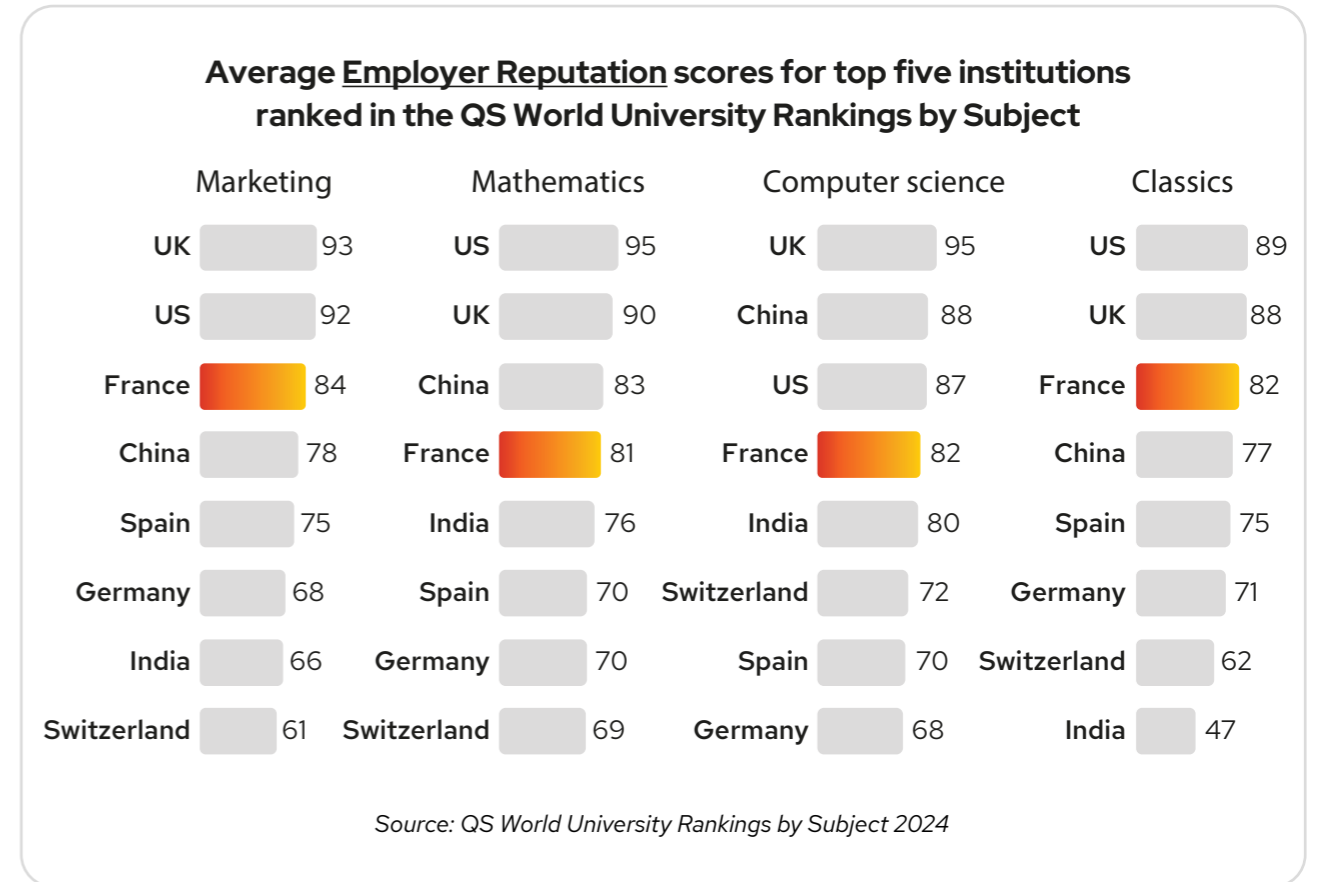
Attracting highly-skilled people to France

The employer reputation of the highest ranked institutions in France has shown a marked improvement.

Graduate employability is a crucial consideration for prospective students as they look to higher education institutions with a strong reputation with graduate employers.

In France, the reputation of the highest ranked institutions amongst employers has shown a marked improvement over recent years, reflecting efforts to ensure graduates leave higher education equipped with the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace. Due to the specialised nature of French institutions, there are specific subjects where France has a world-leading reputation amongst graduate employers. This is most evident in classics, computer science, marketing and mathematics.

Institut Polytechnique de Paris is a prominent example of this, ranked 19th in the world for mathematics and 21st in computer science for their reputation with graduate employers. Along with HEC Paris (6th in the world in employer reputation for marketing) and Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (8th in the world in employer reputation for classics), these institutions represent the pinnacle of French institutions' relationship with employers.



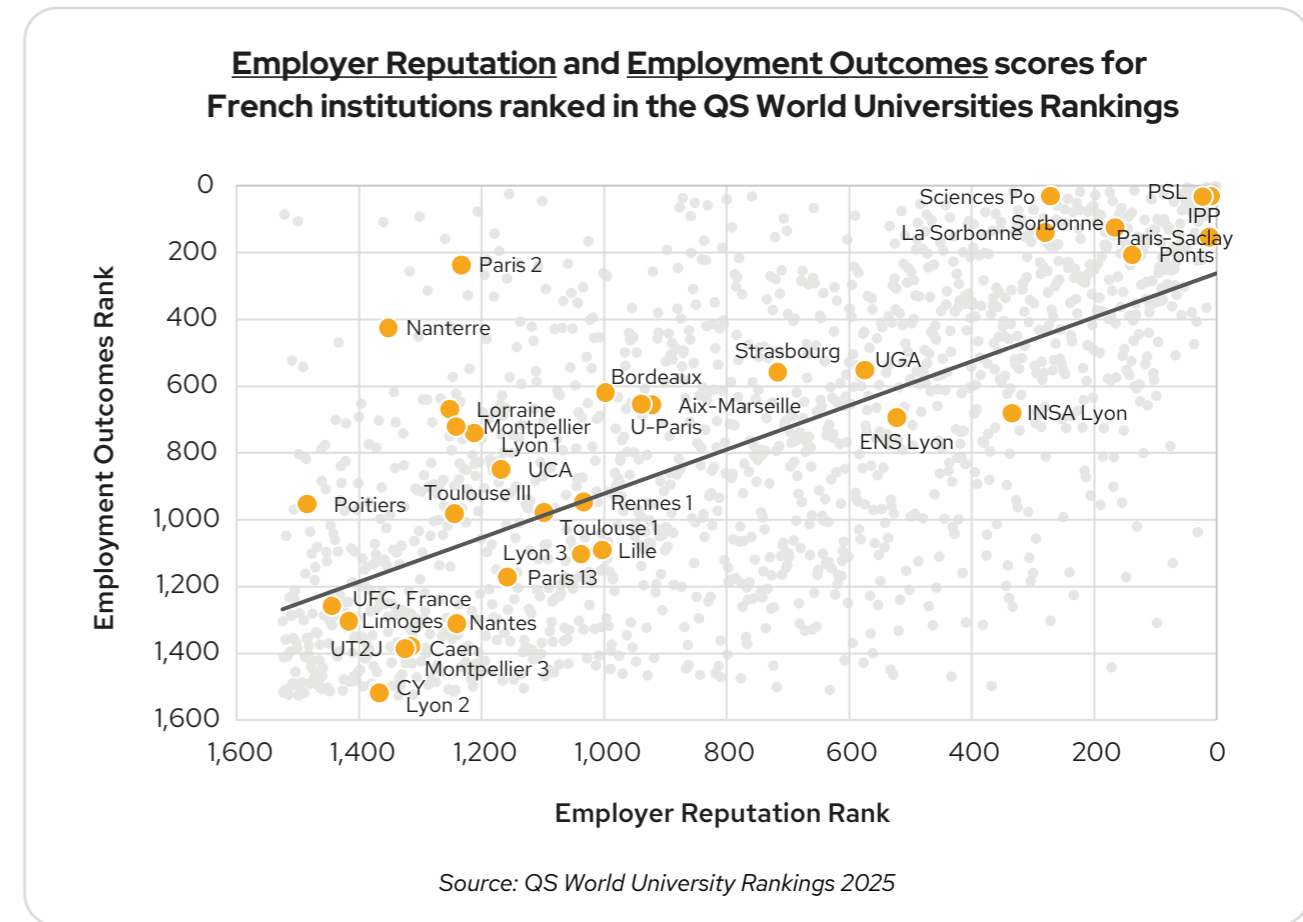
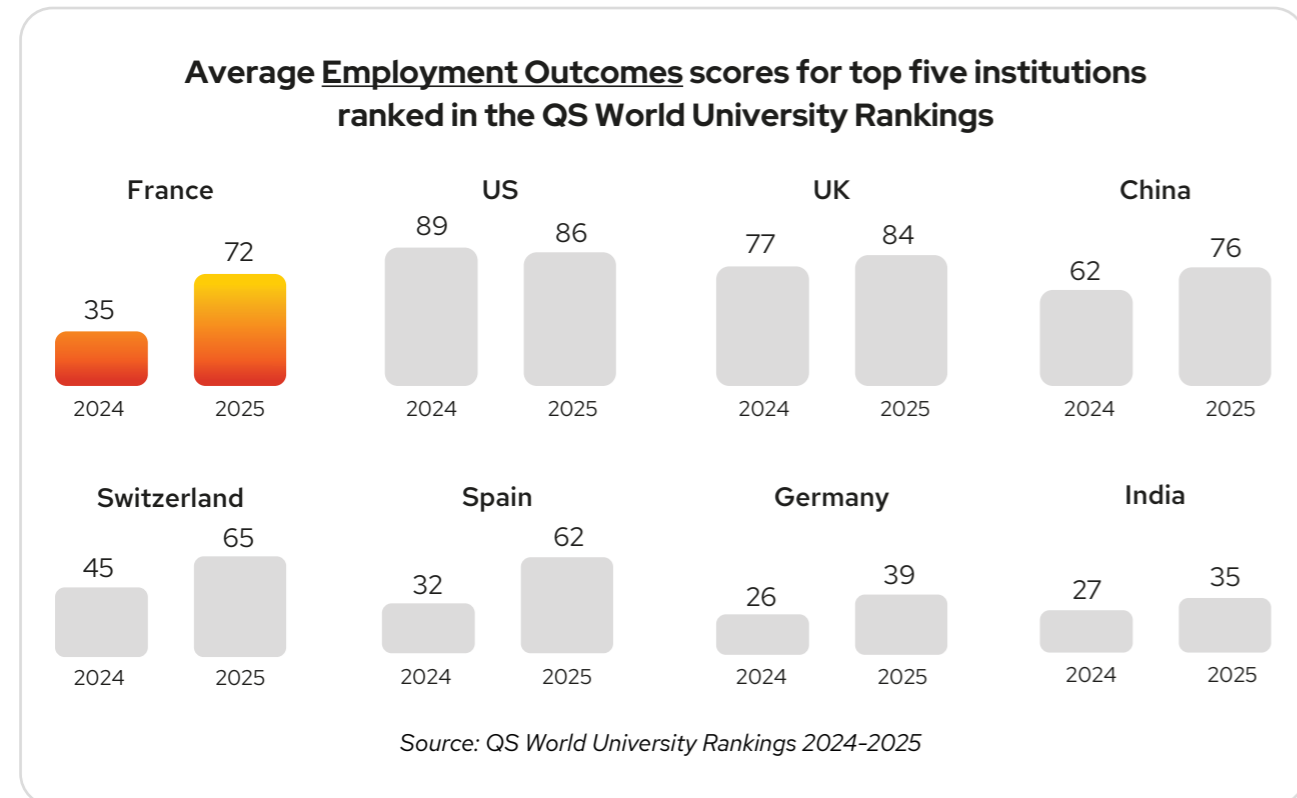
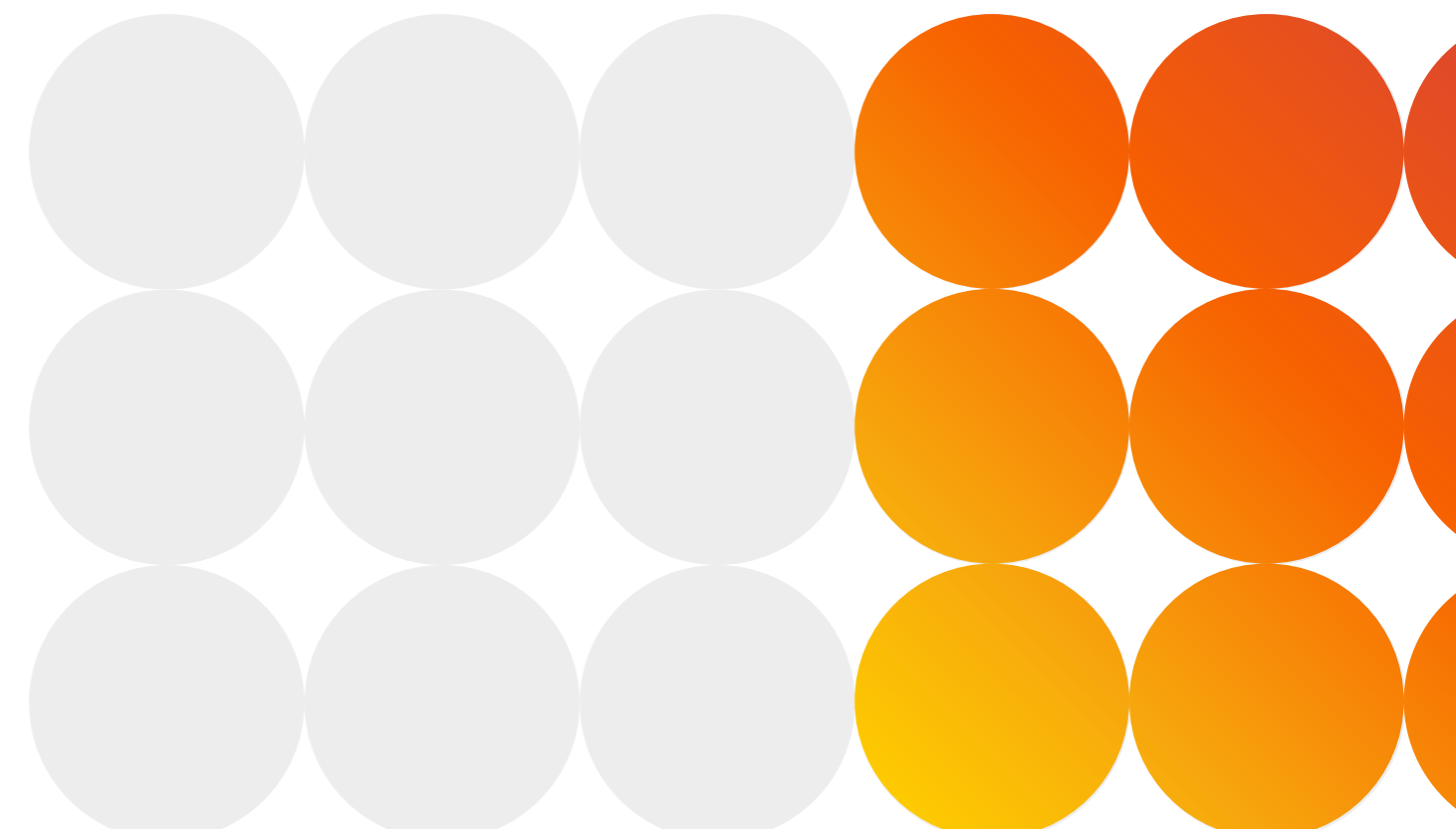
The top institutions in France deliver stronger graduate outcomes than competing destinations in mainland Europe.

This reflects the ability of France's top institutions to deliver and develop employable graduates and nurture future leaders who will go on to make an impact in their respective chosen fields.

Employability and graduate outcomes are some of the principal driving forces behind the strong performance of French institutions when benchmarked internationally.

QS data suggests that the best-ranked institutions in France are successfully leveraging the employment outcomes of their graduates to further enhance their reputation amongst employers. However, outside this group of top institutions there is still a strong concentration of those delivering consistently strong employment outcomes, but without receiving the same recognition from employers.

If the sector is to continue to thrive and deliver the strongest graduate outcomes on a national scale, it will need to broaden its efforts past its top-ranked institutions.



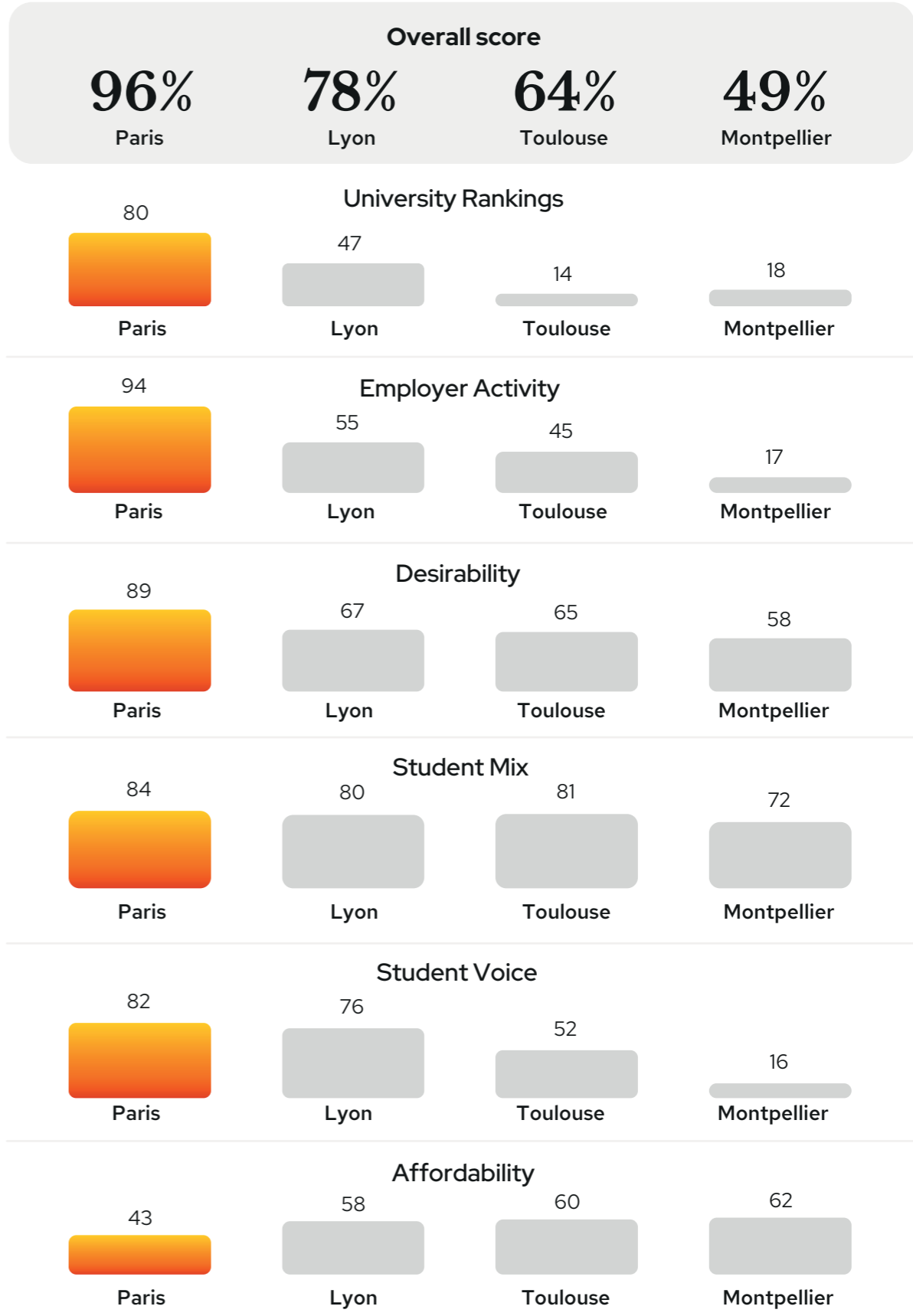
Paris accounts for four of the top five institutions in France and eight of the top 10.

Few other countries have such a high concentration of top institutions in a single city. Whilst the strong overall performance of these top institutions has helped propel Paris to become one of the best cities in the world for students, there is an opportunity to leverage the enhanced reputation of these institutions to benefit the entire higher education sector in France.

Paris is the sixth best city in the world for graduate employer activity, making it one of the most desirable locations for graduates seeking employment. However, the second-best French city for graduate employer activity is Lyon, ranked 94th in the world. This illustrates the fact that outside Paris, the grounds for graduate employers are significantly less fertile in France.

It is crucial for France to build the capabilities of higher education institutions outside of the capital to develop their own centres of skilled labour. In doing so, institutions can provide employers with highly-skilled graduates, helping them to realise the value of international graduates in the economy and ensure the skills development of students matches the needs of their industries.

French cities ranked in the QS Best Student Cities Rankings



Source: QS Best Student Cities Rankings 2025

Fostering research innovation and partnerships



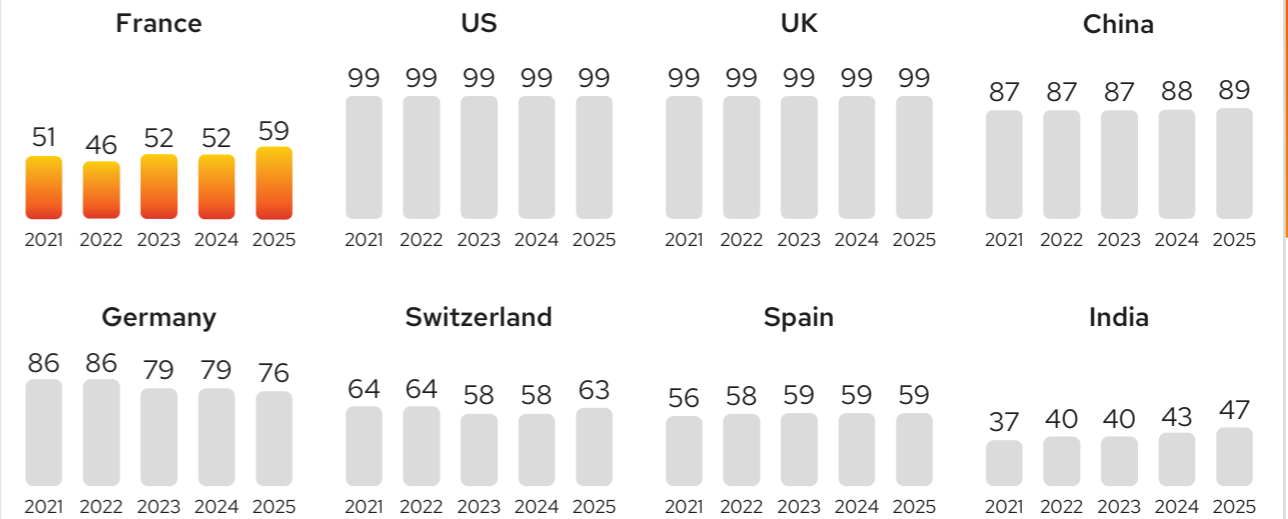
The research opportunity for France is high.

The country's research impact is relatively strong, with institutions achieving more citations per faculty than many of their counterparts in mainland Europe. Though its academic reputation is comparatively weaker, suggesting that France's higher education institutions should maximise visibility of their research and drive greater global recognition.

France's research impact is clearest in specific subjects where investment has led to world-leading research programmes.

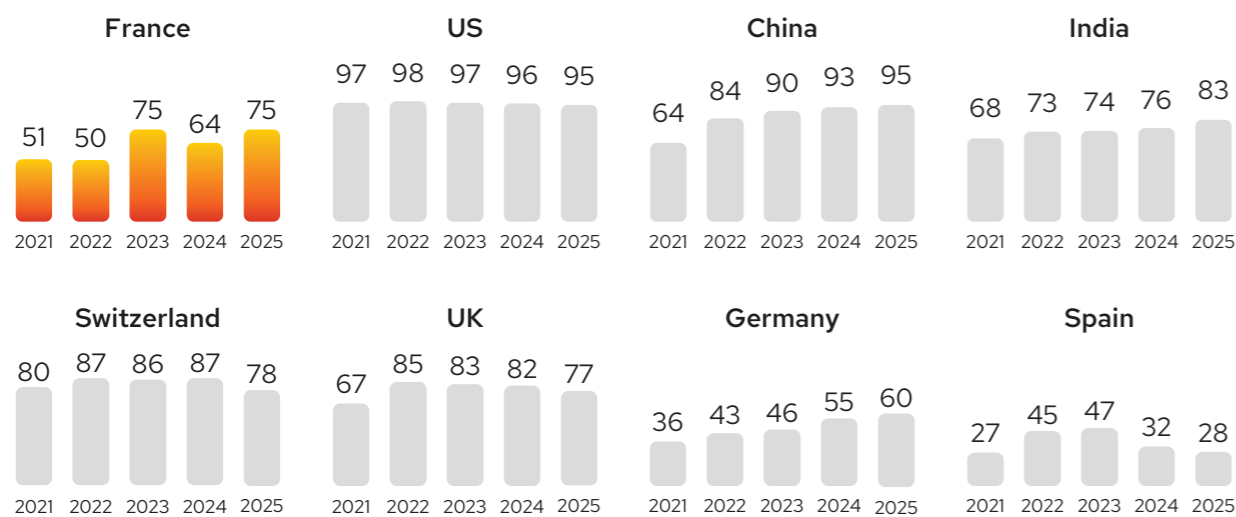
This is most evident in business, law, medicine and statistics. ESCP and IMT Atlantique are two principal examples, being ranked the 6th and 7th best institutions in the world for their research impact in business. Along with Université de Montpellier (6th in the world for research impact in statistics) and Université Sorbonne Paris Nord (14th in the world for research impact in medicine), these institutions highlight the positive impact a specialised structure can have in bringing about world-leading research.

Average Academic Reputation scores for top five institutions ranked in the QS World University Rankings



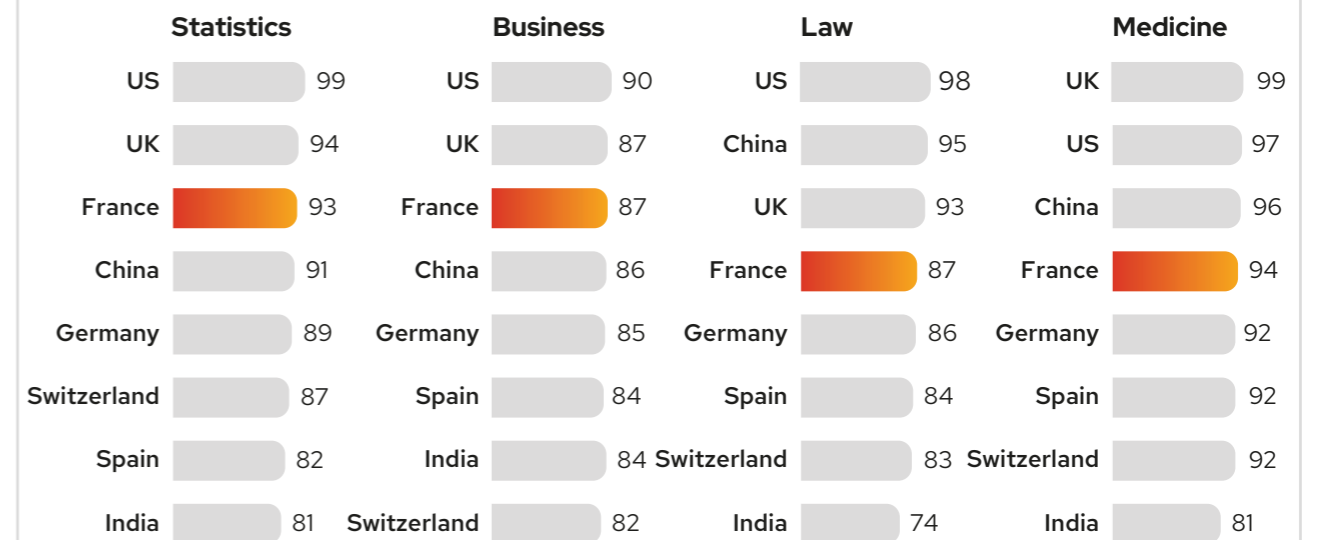
Source: QS World University Rankings 2021-2025

Average Citations Per Faculty scores for top five institutions ranked in the QS World University Rankings



Source: QS World University Rankings 2021-2025

Average Citations per Paper scores for top five institutions ranked in the QS World University Rankings by Subject



Source: QS World University Rankings by Subject 2024

French institutions excel in building international research networks.

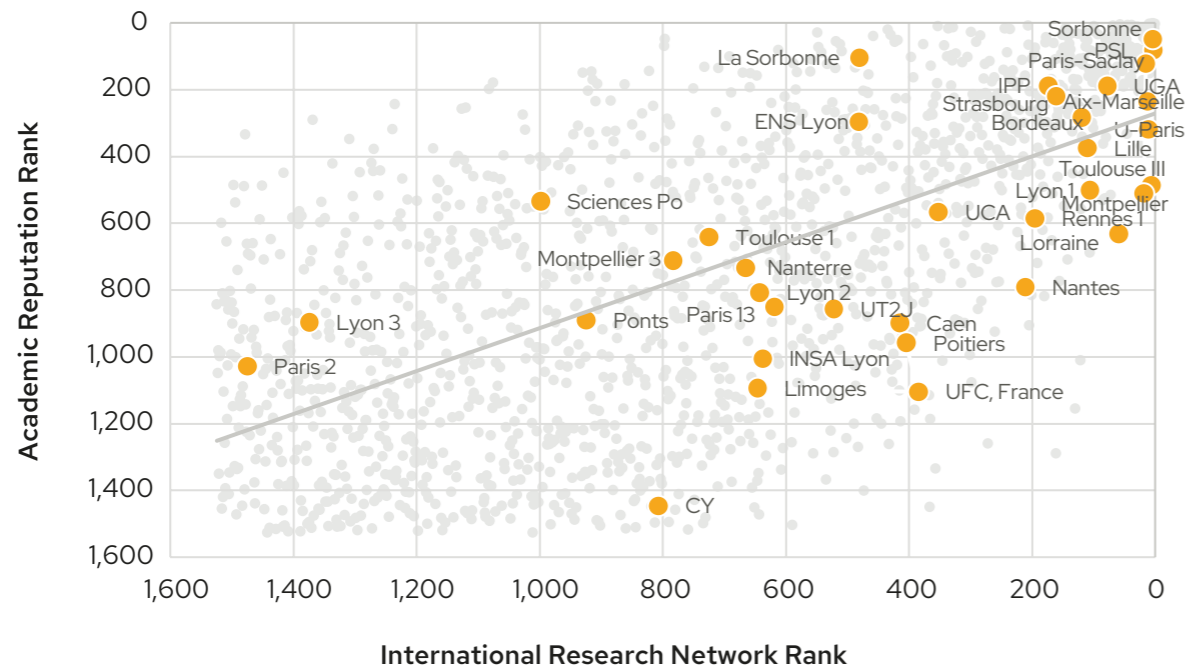
When assessing research innovation and impact within higher education, it is important to take a measure of the relative intensity and volume of research in any given institution. It is also important to evaluate the recognition of said research amongst the broader global academic community.

French higher education institutions perform strongly when it comes to international research networks, reflecting their ability to create and sustain overseas research partnerships and engage effectively with their international partners.

There is an opportunity for France to reinforce existing regional research partnerships – research networks within Europe are strong, evidenced by the fact that seven of the top 10 collaborative research markets for France, Germany and Spain are all from within Europe.

It's crucial that institutions can leverage this tactical advantage over other higher education superpowers to further enhance research quality, as there is a strong correlation between international research network engagement and research impact.

Academic Reputation and International Research Network scores for French institutions ranked in the QS World University Rankings



Source: QS World University Rankings 2021-2025

Top 10 countries for international research collaborations

	France	Germany	Spain	UK	Switzerland	Brazil	US	China	India
1	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	China	USA	USA
2	UK	UK	UK	China	Germany	UK	UK	UK	Saudi Arabia
3	Germany	Italy	Italy	Germany	UK	Spain	Canada	Australia	UK
4	Italy	France	Germany	Italy	France	Germany	Germany	Hong Kong	China
5	Spain	China	France	Australia	Italy	Portugal	Italy	Canada	South Korea
6	China	Switzerland	Netherlands	France	Netherlands	France	Australia	Germany	Australia
7	Switzerland	Netherlands	Portugal	Netherlands	Spain	Italy	France	Japan	Germany
8	Canada	Spain	Switzerland	Spain	Canada	Canada	India	Singapore	Malaysia
9	Netherlands	Austria	China	Canada	China	Australia	Spain	Pakistan	Canada
10	Belgium	Canada	Brazil	Switzerland	Australia	China	Japan	France	Italy

● European countries

Source: Scopus database 2019-2025

To drive further economic growth, French higher education institutions must ensure they are effectively creating and maintaining international research partnerships, identifying obstacles and weaknesses to build partnerships where there are opportunities for enhanced research performance.

It will be vital for French institutions to develop strategies for attracting and retaining top faculty members based on global best practices, to provide world-class research impact that drives impactful teaching and learning.

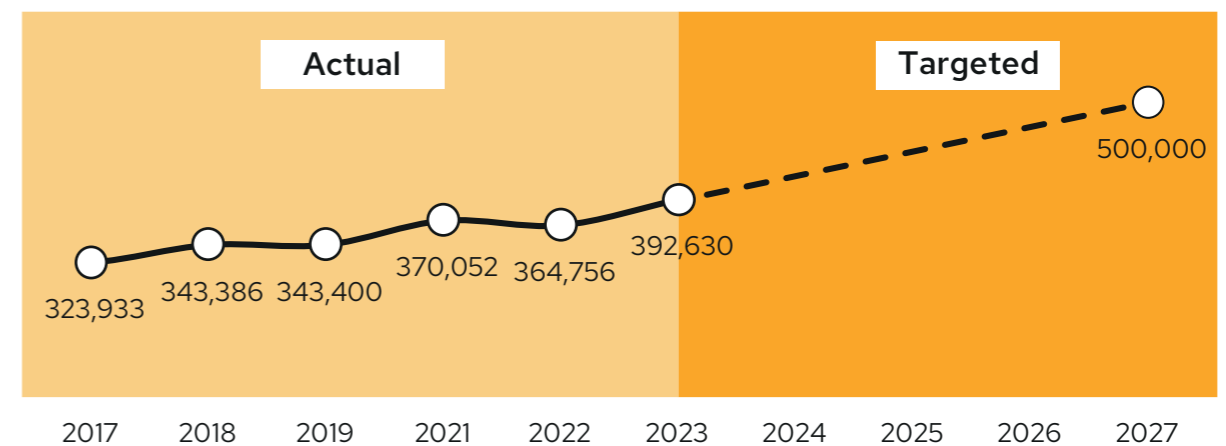


Reaching ambitious international recruitment targets

France has consistently attracted international students in ever greater numbers.

The numbers rise from approximately 289,000 in 2013 to just under 400,000 in 2023 – representing a growth rate of 36% over a ten-year period⁸. These figures are testament not only to the successful recruitment strategies enacted by French institutions, but also to the French government’s open-door policies to drive global engagement.

Inbound students to France 2017-2023



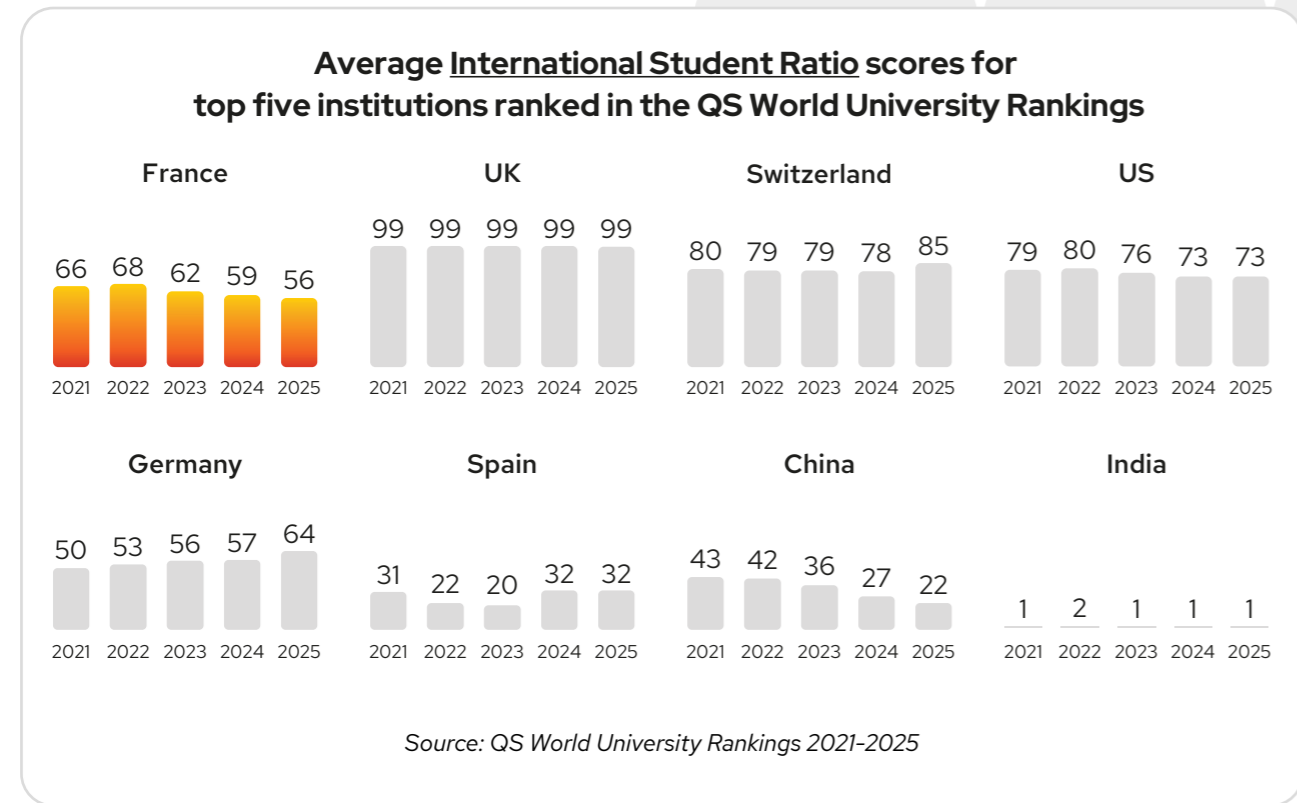
Source: Campus France

⁸ France sees a record rise in foreign students | Campus France

Attracting 500,000 international students by 2027 will require a 5% annual growth rate over the next four years.

Despite the strong growth in international enrolments over the last ten years, the ratio of international to domestic students in French institutions falls behind other major European destinations, as well as the UK and US. Not only does this suggest that the learning experience is less diverse in French institutions (with a lower range of viewpoints brought into classroom discussions), it implies that the benefits of cultural exchange and networking opportunities are limited for French students.

The comparatively smaller size of international student cohorts within institutions also suggests that international students in France are more likely to feel isolated from their broader student community.



French institutions must cater their recruitment activities to the specific needs and motivations of prospective students from each source market.

International students in France are drawn from a diverse and varied pool – Africa is a significant contributor, with China, India, the rest of Europe and the United States all exporting large numbers of students to France.

Candidates from across Africa (including Morocco, Algeria and Senegal) are more likely to prioritise the availability of scholarships and a welcoming environment for international students. Conversely, candidates from China, India, Europe and the US are more likely to prioritise the quality of teaching, courses which spark their personal interest, performance in rankings and the reputation of that institution for their chosen subject.

Data from the QS International Student Survey 2024 highlights the differing priorities for students from these markets and reiterates the importance of institutions developing tailored recruitment strategies for individual countries.

Top three priorities when choosing an institution for largest international student markets for France

	Algeria	Morocco	Senegal	Tunisia	China	India	Italy	Germany	Spain	United States
It offers high-quality teaching	2	3	3	1	2	2	1	1	1	2
It is welcoming to international students	1	2	1	2						
It offers scholarships	3	1	2			1				
Make friends with people from different countries				3						
It is well-ranked					3		2			
Has a good reputation for chosen subject					1	3		3	2	1
Offers a specific course of interest							3	2	3	3

Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

French higher education institutions have a strong presence in the subject rankings.

The importance of subject reputation cannot be overstated in student decision-making, especially for candidates from China, India, Europe and North America. These rankings not only underscore the diverse academic expertise in French institutions but also indicate the breadth of subjects offered and the depth of research and education in these areas.

The high ranks assigned to French institutions in specific subjects showcase their areas of strength and potential areas of improvement. Sorbonne Université ranks within the top 200 across 30 subjects, indicating its broad academic scope. This diversity reflects the university's multidisciplinary approach and drive to excel across various academic fields, further enhancing their reputation globally.

The presence of elite institutions like INSEAD, Sciences Po Paris, and HEC Paris within the top 100 rankings in subjects like business, economics, marketing, and social sciences and management demonstrates the high standing of French higher education institutions in these domains. Their distinguished performance reaffirms their capacity to offer world-class education and research on par with the best global standards, contributing significantly to the academic and professional development of students and scholars.

French institutions in the world top 15 by subject

Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris
Music: 3rd
Performing arts: 3rd

Université Paris 1 Pantheon Sorbonne
Archaeology: 14th
Classics: 15th

INSEAD
Business: 2nd
Marketing: 12th

Université Paris Saclay
Mathematics: 13th
Physics: 14th

Sciences Po Paris
Politics: 2nd
Social policy: 12th

PSL Université
Natural sciences: 15th

Sorbonne Université
Mathematics: 12th
Natural sciences: 13th

Vatel, Hotel and Tourism Business School
Hospitality: 13th

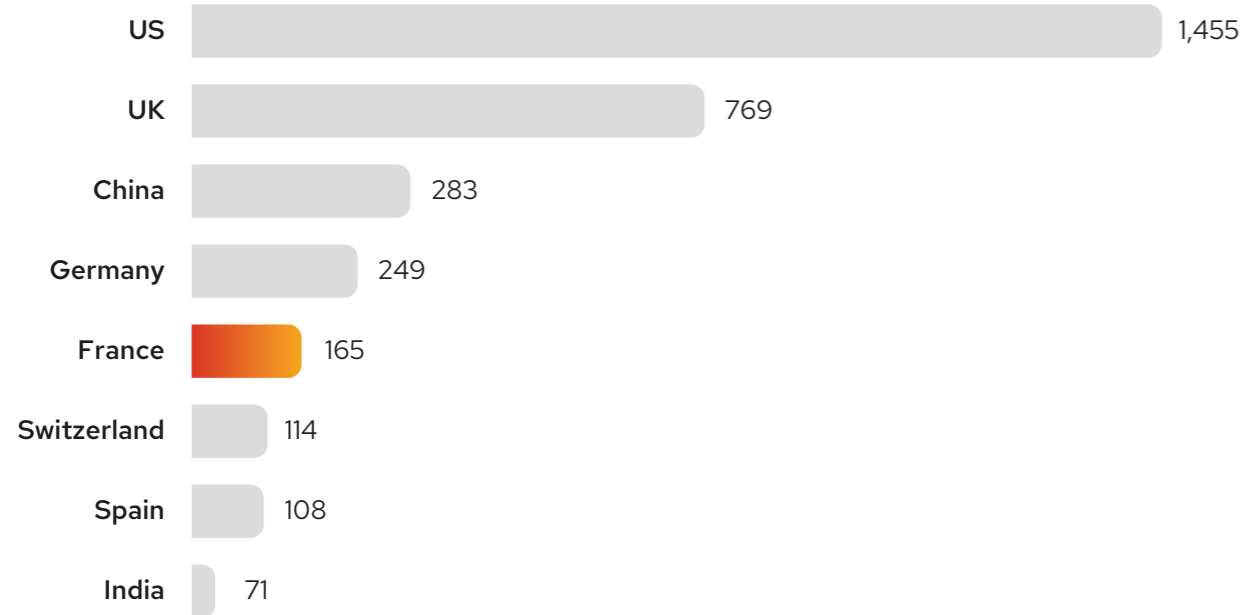
HEC Paris
Marketing: 9th
Business: 11th

France has a distinct advantage over some of its competitor destinations in natural sciences.

25% of French institutions are ranked in the top 100 across 53 subjects in the QS World University Rankings by Subject. Out of 165 instances of French institutions in the top 100 across 33 institutions, the highest concentrations are in social sciences (45), natural sciences (42), and arts and humanities (39).

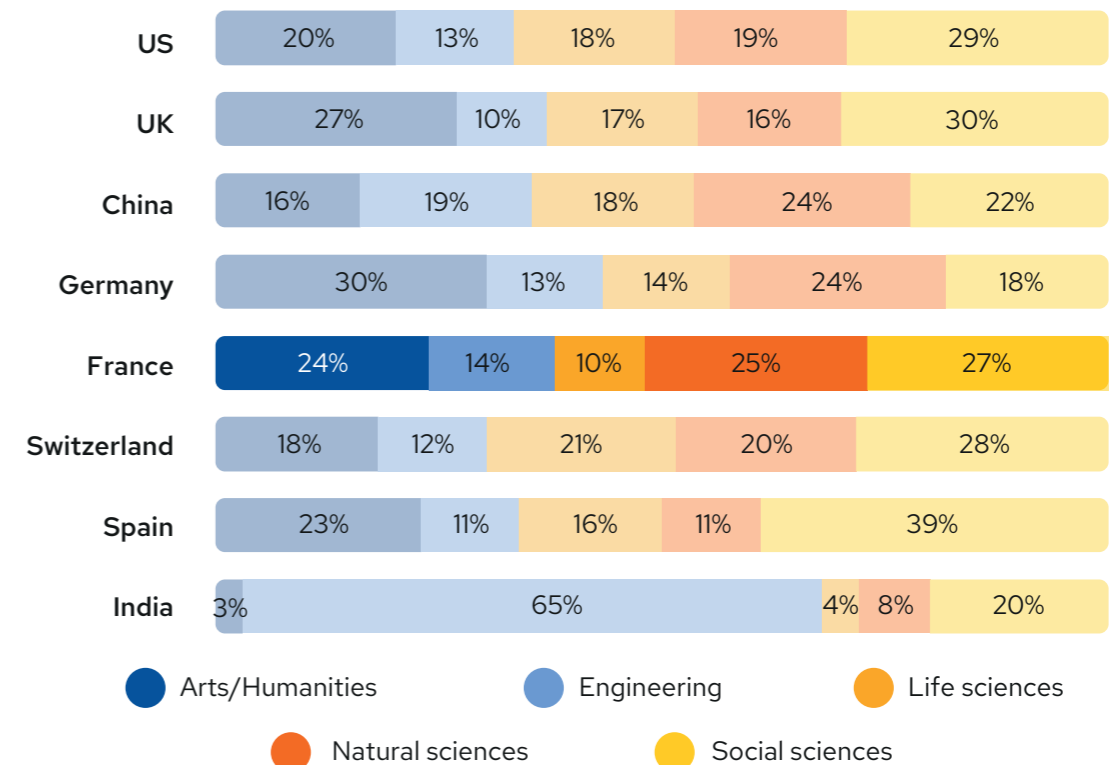
A quarter of French institutions ranked inside the top 100 sit within the natural sciences – a proportion not seen in any other destination. Bolstered by high performances in subjects like mathematics, where four of the top 20 institutions in the world are French, France can offer a diverse range of high-performing institutions across different subjects to effectively attract and nurture prospective students.

Number of instances of top 100 ranked institutions in the QS World University Rankings by Subject



Source: QS World University Rankings by Subject 2024

Breakdown of instances of top 100 ranked institutions in the QS World University Rankings by Subject & Breakdown of top 100 instances by faculty



Source: QS World University Rankings by Subject 2024

Given the growth observed in previous years, France’s target of attracting 500,000 international students by 2027 would appear to be easily achievable. However, as the international student recruitment market becomes increasingly competitive, institutions will need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of student motivations and expectations, and develop sustainable recruitment strategies to reflect them.

Appendices

In the increasingly interconnected higher education environment, higher education institutions are confronted with rising competition for students, faculty, research opportunities, and funding. A higher education institution that competes on a global scale is distinguished by its esteemed academic and research reputation, highly-skilled faculty, diverse student population, innovative academic offerings, state-of-the-art research facilities, and successful graduate outcomes.

Rankings significantly influence an institution's global competitiveness.

The QS World University Rankings utilise eight primary performance indicators to assess and rank higher education institutions worldwide.

These indicators include:

- Academic reputation (30%)
- Employer reputation (15%)
- Faculty-to-student ratio (10%)
- Citations per faculty (20%)
- International faculty ratio (5%)
- International student ratio (5%)
- International research network (5%)
- Employment outcomes (5%)
- Sustainability (5%)

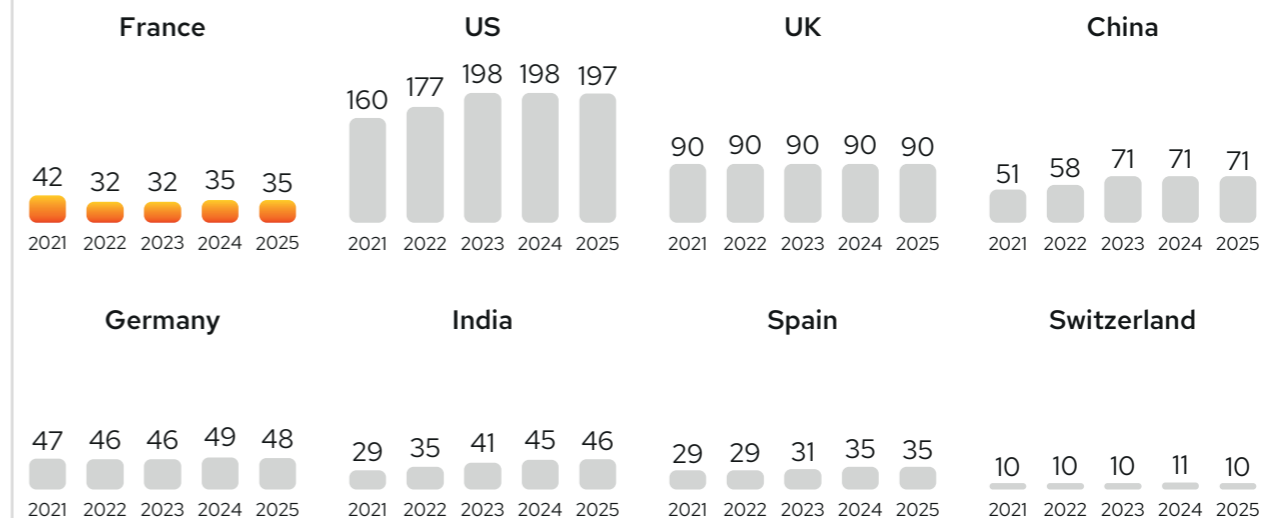
Each indicator evaluates different facets of an institution's performance, offering a comprehensive analysis of its strengths and areas needing improvement. Together, these indicators identify the most competitive and high-performing institutions, shaping the global higher education landscape and assisting students, academics, and policymakers in their decision-making.

Rankings indicators show that French institutions fall behind in employer reputation and employment outcomes.

Over the years, French higher education institutions have made little progress in enhancing their global competitiveness, as demonstrated by their performance in the QS World University Rankings. An unmistakable trend has emerged: the number of French institutions ranked within the top 1,000 globally has remained with little change on an annual basis over the last four years (32 to 35), which is lower than the number of these institutions in 2021 (42).

This trend is especially apparent when contrasted with the opposite trajectory observed among universities from China (51 to 72), India (29 to 46) and the United States (160 to 197). All of these have witnessed a consistent increase in representation within the top 1,000.

Number of higher education institutions ranked in the world

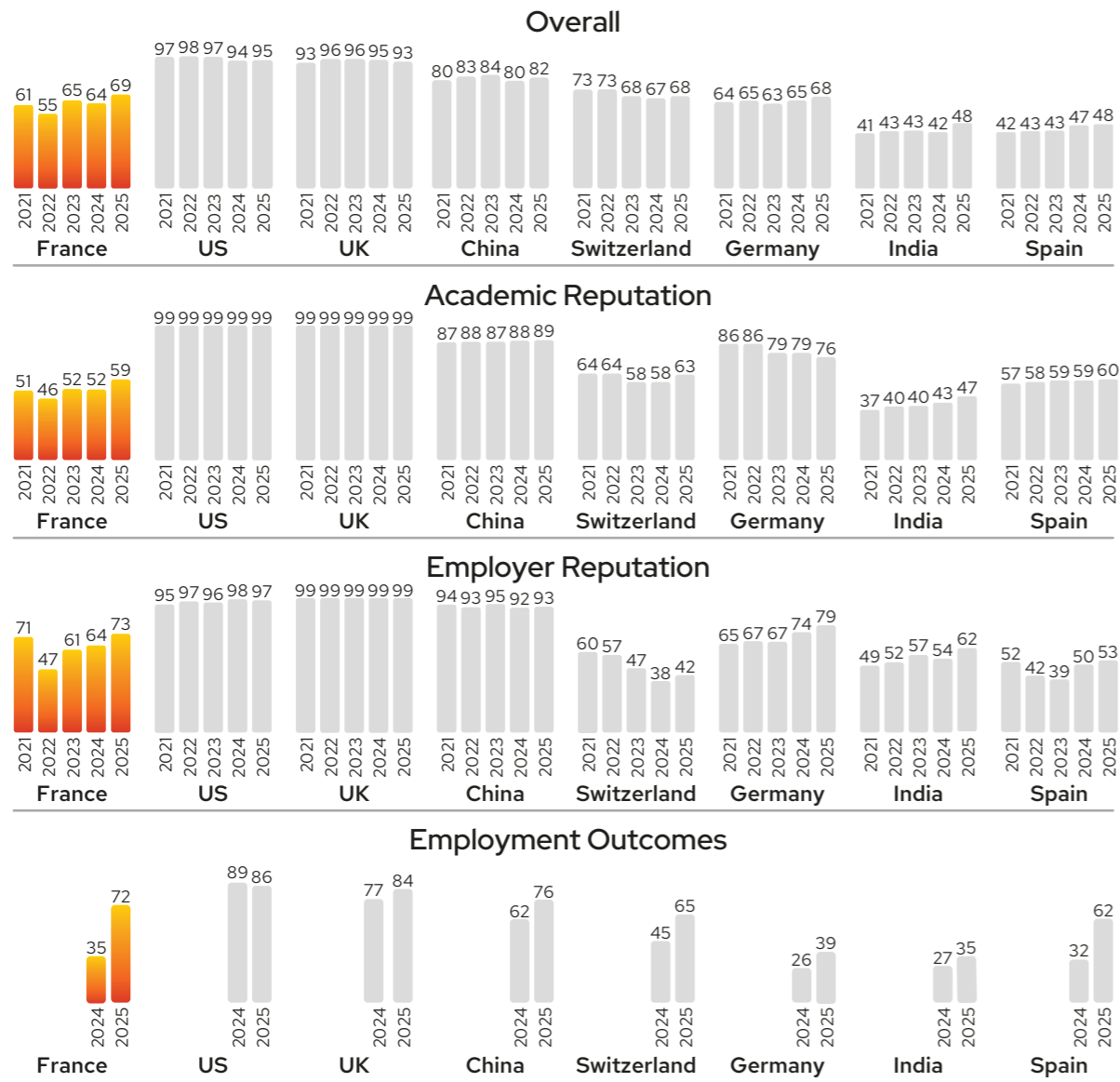


Source: QS World University Rankings 2021-2025

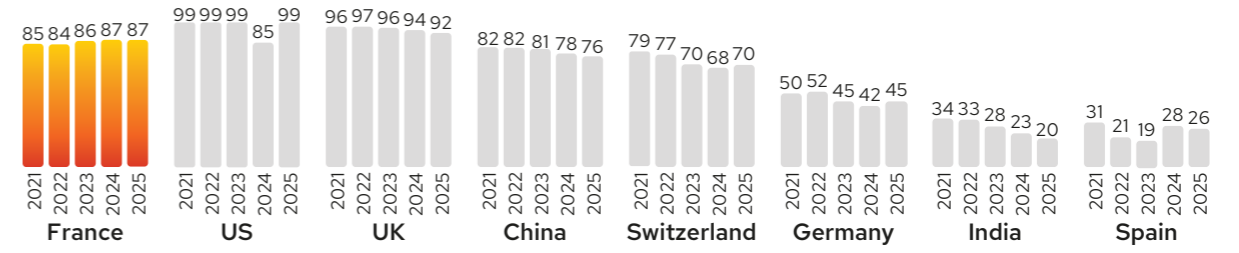
An indicator-level evaluation of the top five higher education institutions in France shows that there is room for improvement in key indicators such as employer reputation and employment outcomes, which are crucial for attracting top talent and ensuring student success post-graduation.

France also falls behind competitor countries in academic reputation, highlighting the importance of further engagement with the world for wider recognition.

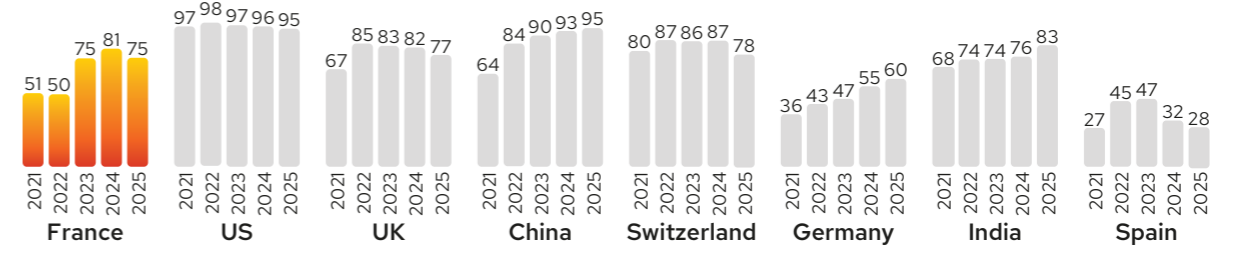
Average scores per indicator for the top five universities ranked in the QS World University Rankings



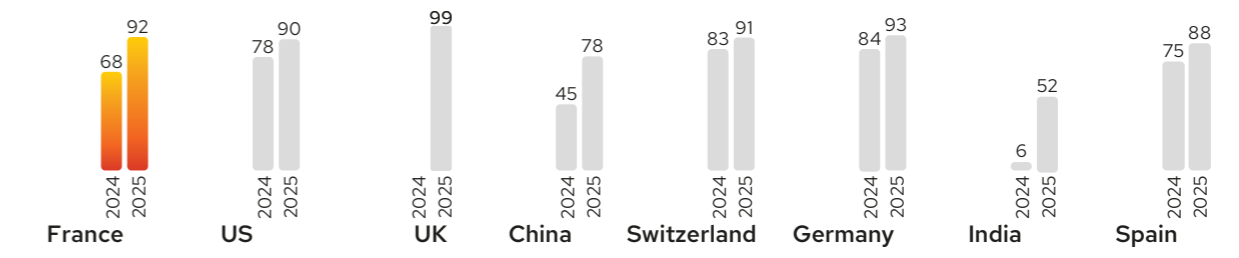
Faculty Student Ratio



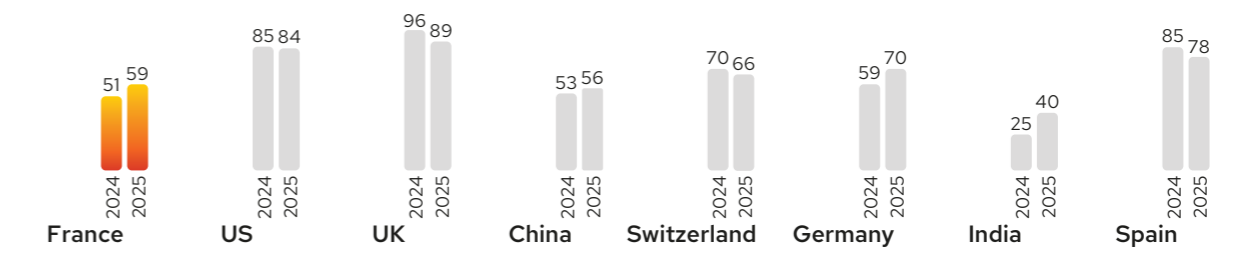
Citations per Faculty



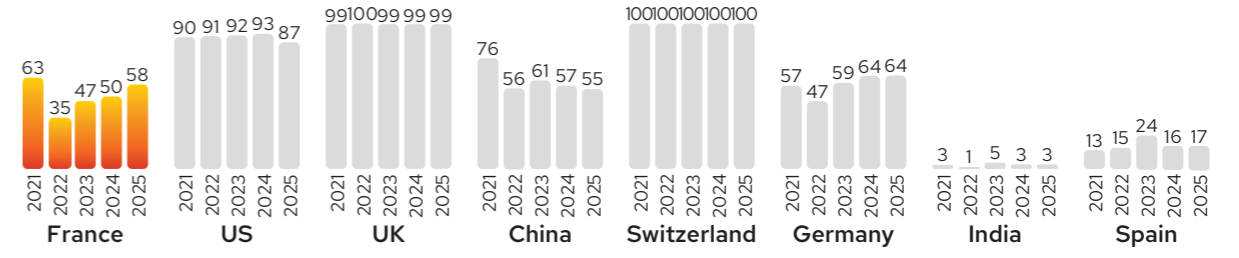
International Research Network



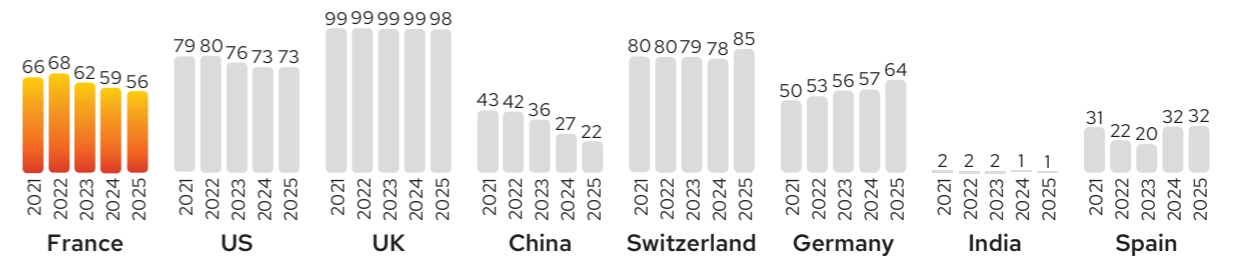
Sustainability



International Faculty Ratio



International Student Ratio



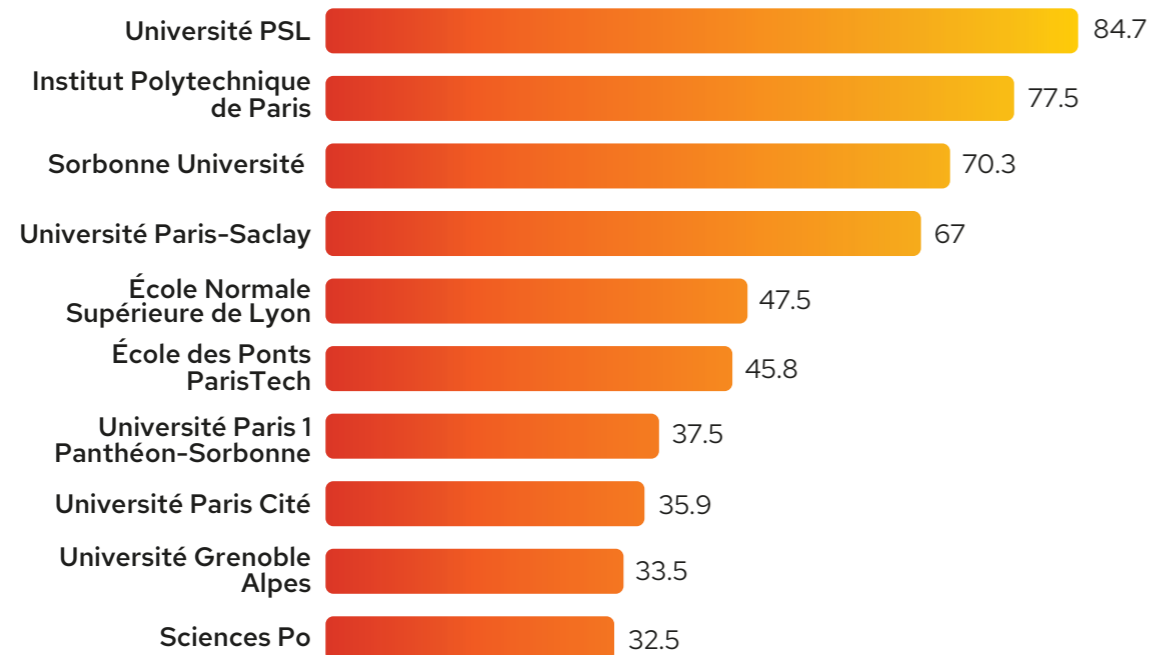
Source: QS World University Rankings 2021-2025

A deeper analysis of French institutions' performance in the QS World University Rankings reveals the following insights:

Université PSL leads the list with a score of 84.7, distinguishing itself as the top-performing institution in France. Its high ranking reflects robust overall performance across various indicators.

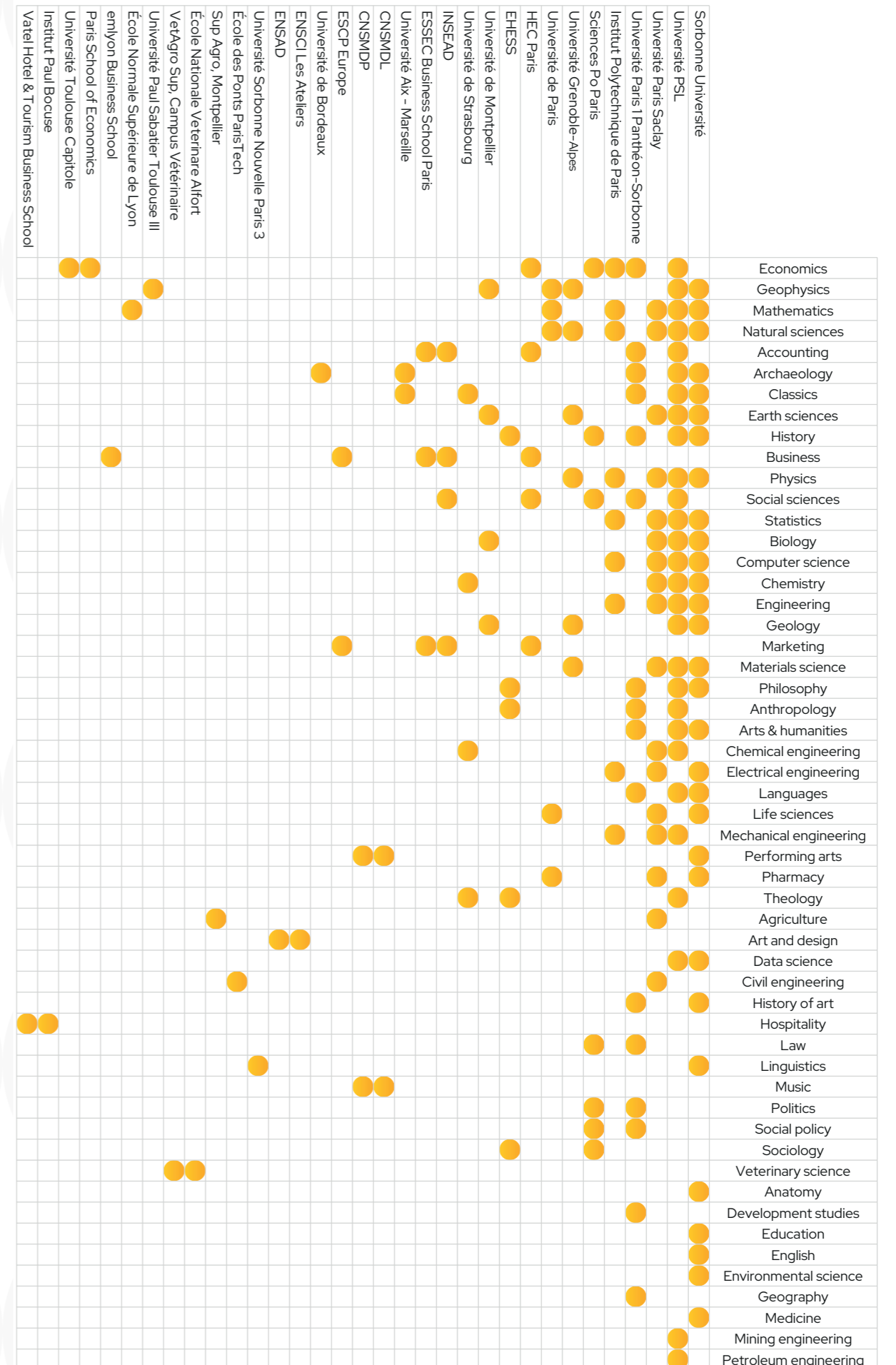
Following PSL are Institut Polytechnique de Paris with a score of 77.5 and Sorbonne Université, with a score of 70.3. Université Paris-Saclay holds the fourth position with a score of 67.0. École Normale Supérieure de Lyon and École des Ponts ParisTech are next, scoring 47.5 and 45.8 respectively, and are recognised for their specialised programmes and significant contributions to research and education in their fields.

Overall scores for top 10 French institutions ranked in the QS World University Rankings



Source: QS World University Rankings 2025

French institutions in the world top 100 in the QS World University Rankings by Subject

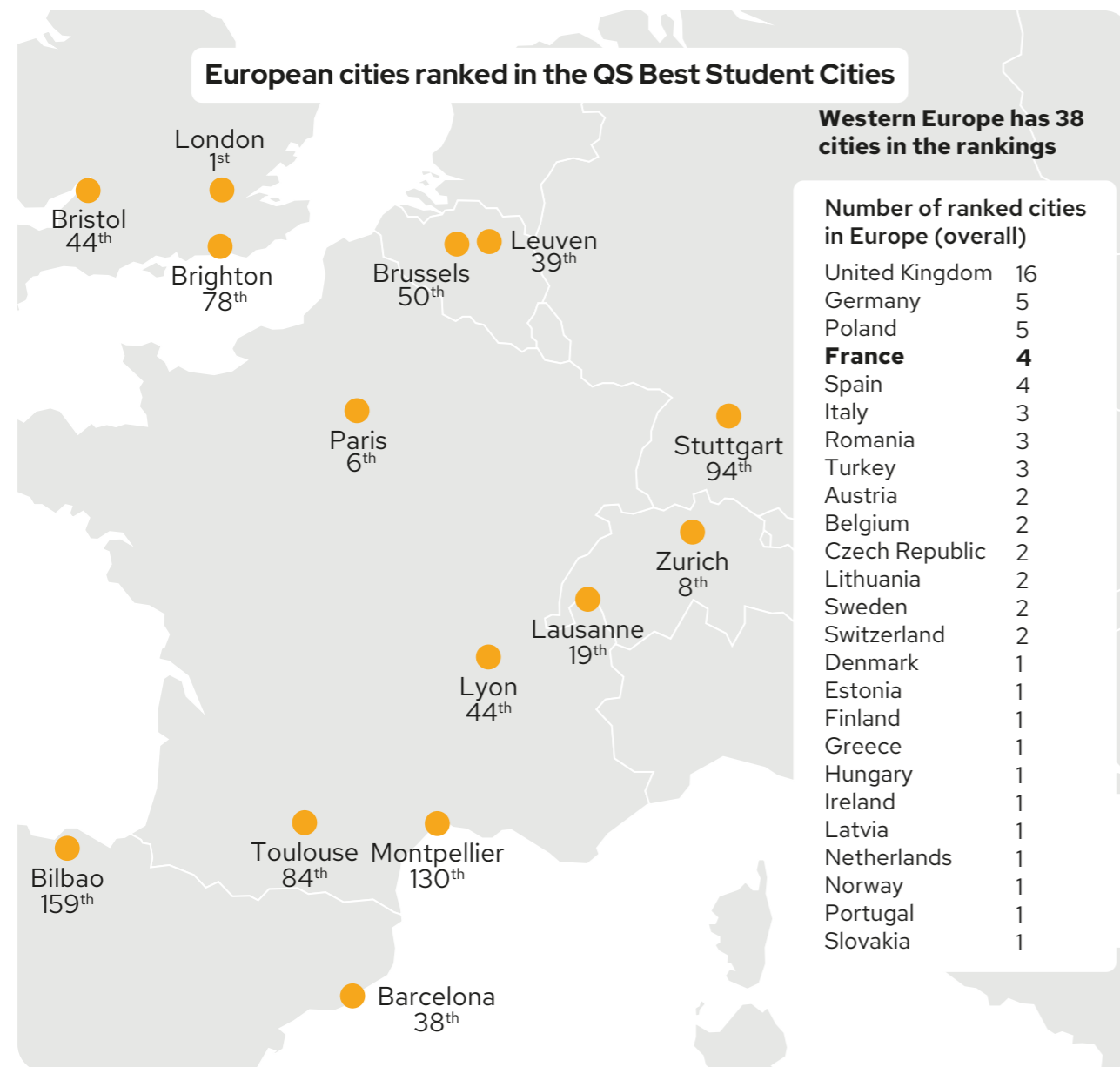


Source: QS World University Rankings by Subject

Paris is the world's seventh best city in the world.

The QS Best Student Cities ranking focuses on evaluating cities themselves rather than the higher education institutions within them, considering various factors including affordability, desirability, and feedback from current students to offer an overview of the most favourable places for living and studying globally.

France has four cities ranked in the QS Best Student Cities ranking: Paris, Lyon, Montpellier and Toulouse. Paris is ranked as the seventh best city in the world in the QS Best Student Cities ranking, and places sixth in the world for graduate employer activity – the concentration of high performing institutions, coupled with their strong reputation amongst employers make it one of the most desirable locations for graduates seeking employment.



Your global enablement partner

QS offers unrivalled data, expertise and solutions for the higher education sector. Our mission is to empower students around the world to achieve their full potential, and we work closely with higher education institutions to help them take a data-driven approach to their strategic thinking.

Our insights and expertise are unmatched

We gather billions of data points from our global network of employers, academics and prospective students, providing unrivalled insights into the higher education landscape. We are known and respected globally for our data-driven expertise, including the QS World University Rankings portfolio which incorporates data from millions of academic papers, and the views of academics and employers. The QS International Student Survey measures the preferences and motivations of over 100,000 prospective students each year.

We are a trusted student recruitment partner for the sector

We reach over 60 million unique visitors per year through our digital platforms and our recruitment support covers every stage of the student journey, from initial awareness to offer acceptance and enrolment.

Partner with us and achieve your strategic goals

We partner with over 1,500 university and business school clients, to deliver bespoke comparative performance analysis and consultancy. We focus on metrics such as research impact, reputational standing, sustainability, student employability, and internationalisation to help institutions achieve their strategic goals.

We work with government bodies across the world

We are proud to have worked with government bodies in many geographies including the Middle East, Central Asia and South Eastern Asia, helping them to build quality assurance frameworks and deliver national-level projects that bring together government, higher education institutions and QS to provide insights and actionable advice.



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