

## **Three Decades of Transformation: The Evolving Landscape of UK Private Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

The landscape of private higher education in the UK has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades, aimed at expanding access, increasing student choices, enhancing quality, shaped by evolving government policies and reforms.

The higher education (HE) landscape in the United Kingdom has experienced significant transformations over the past few decades, aimed at expanding access, increasing student choices, enhancing quality, and fostering innovation.

This paper investigates the complex dynamics of this evolution, focusing on key research questions that explore the influence of governmental policies since the 1990s, the initiatives and reforms introduced during this period, and the factors driving the proliferation of private higher education institutions (PrHEIs). During the second decade, PrHEIs rapidly expanded and recruited a large number of students, with many being labelled as bogus colleges. The study examines the measures implemented to ensure quality assurance and regulatory oversight in this rapidly growing sector, addressing educational standards and transparency concerns. In the 2010s, the government's crackdown on non-compliant institutions led to the suspension or revocation of Tier 4 licenses, highlighting the tension between expansion and regulation.

The sector has expanded from the singular existence of the University of Buckingham to encompass over ten reputable PrHEIs with awarding powers. The paper also explores the shift in business models, particularly the adoption of franchising, which aims to widen participation and access to higher education for non-traditional and mature students, moving away from a predominant focus on international students.

Furthermore, the paper discusses emerging trends and potential future developments within the UK's private higher education landscape, providing a comprehensive overview of the sector's trajectory and its implications for the broader higher education ecosystem. This research offers valuable insights into the complexities and prospects of private higher education in the UK, contributing to a nuanced understanding of its past, present, and future.

**Keywords:** UK Government, UK Higher Education (HE), Private Higher Education Institutions (PrHEIs), International Students, Growth and Transformation, Three decades

**Introduction**

The UK's Higher Education (HE) landscape is characterised by a mix of public and private institutions, each with distinct governance and funding structures that influence their operations and societal roles. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are broadly categorised as either public or private, but this categorisation can be nuanced and complex due to the need for clear conceptual clarity (Marginson, 2007; Levin, 2005). According to UNESCO (2014), Public Higher Education Institutions (PuHEIs) are those governed and managed by public education authorities, government agencies, or bodies appointed by a public authority. These institutions are typically characterised by state ownership and funding, influencing their policy-making and operational frameworks (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). The governance structure of PuHEIs usually involves significant oversight from government bodies, ensuring alignment with national education policies and priorities (UNESCO, 2014).

Public and private HEIs can be differentiated based on legal ownership, funding sources, and societal impact (Buckner, 2017). Levy (2012) describes private higher education institutes (PrHEIs) based on national definitions, while Altbach (1999) defines them as institutions operating for profit without government grants, responsible for their own funding. A PrHEI typically has private ownership and funding, whereas a Public Higher Education Institution (PuHEI) has state ownership and funding (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). Functionally, both types of institutions are similar, differing primarily in ownership and funding (Duczmal, 2006).

In contrast, PrHEIs are managed by non-governmental entities, including religious organisations, trade unions, or business enterprises, with their governing board members not selected by a public body (UNESCO, 2014). These institutions operate independently of direct government control, allowing greater flexibility in their operational and strategic decisions. PrHEIs are typically characterised by private ownership and funding, often relying on tuition fees, donations, and other private sources of revenue (Buckner, 2017). According to Levy (2012), PrHEIs are defined based on national criteria, and they operate without government grants, assuming full responsibility for their financial sustainability. Altbach (1999) notes that these institutions often operate for profit, prioritising financial viability alongside educational outcomes.

The differentiation between public and private HEIs is not merely a matter of ownership and funding but also extends to their societal roles and impacts. PuHEIs are generally perceived as serving the public good, providing accessible education to a broad demographic and contributing to national development goals. In contrast, PrHEIs, while contributing to education and skill development, may prioritise niche markets or specialised programmes that cater to specific industries or professional fields (Duczmal, 2006). Despite differences in governance and funding, this functional similarity in educational roles highlights the diverse approaches within the HE sector to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021).

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In the UK, private higher education is defined by institutions known as Alternative Providers. Alternative providers are Higher Education providers who do not receive recurrent funding from Office for Students (previously HEFCE) or other public body and who are not further education colleges (HESA, 2019/20). Additionally, Alternative Providers are distinct from further education colleges, operating independently in terms of financial support and governance.

Overall, the coexistence of public and private HEIs in the UK contributes to a dynamic and diversified HE landscape, offering a range of educational opportunities and catering to diverse student needs and societal demands. This dual system allows for innovation and competition, fostering an environment where both public and private HEIs can thrive and contribute to the country's broader educational and economic objectives (Marginson, 2007; Levin, 2005).

### Research Questions

This paper seeks to address the following questions:

1. How have government policies since the 1990s influenced the growth and transformation of private higher education in the UK?
2. What were the key initiatives and reforms introduced by the UK government in the 1990s to promote private higher education, and how have these evolved over the past three decades?
3. What factors have contributed to the increase in PrHEIs in the UK from one (University of Buckingham) to more than ten?
4. What measures have been implemented to ensure quality assurance and regulatory oversight in the UK's rapidly expanding private HE sector?
5. How do PrHEIs contribute to widening participation and access to higher education for non-traditional/mature students?
6. What are the emerging trends and potential future developments in the landscape of private HE in the UK?

### Three decades

The landscape of private higher education in the UK has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades, aimed at expanding access, increasing student choices, and enhancing quality, shaped by evolving government policies and reforms (Khawaja, 2024).

The past three decades have witnessed a remarkable transformation in the landscape of HE in the United Kingdom, characterised by the significant growth and evolution of PrHEIs. This phenomenon, driven by a complex interplay of factors, including changing government policies such as privatisation, liberalisation and marketisation (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021), shifting student demands, and global trends in private higher education, has reshaped the educational landscape and expanded the options available to aspiring learners (Qureshi, 2023). This comprehensive exploration delves into the key developments, driving forces, and implications of the evolution of private HE in the UK, divided into three distinct phases: the 1990s, 2000-2010, and 2011-2021.

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### Decade 1: 1990s - The Rise of University Status and Emergent of Private HEIs

The 1990s marked a pivotal turning point for private higher education in the UK, characterised by the emergence and proliferation of independent HEIs. This era marked a relaxation of Conservative government (1990-97) regulations and a growing recognition of the potential benefits of market competition in the UK HE sector.

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 marked a significant turning point in the structure and governance of further and higher education in the UK (Clarke & Belstead, 1992). One of the critical changes introduced by the Act was removing more than 500 further education and sixth form colleges from local education authority (LEA) control, transferring them to newly established Further Education Funding Councils (FEFCs). This shift aimed to provide colleges with greater autonomy and flexibility in their operations, enabling them to respond more effectively to the needs of students and employers (Ainley, 1994).

The Act also facilitated the transformation of polytechnics into universities, allowing these institutions to apply for university status. This change was instrumental in broadening the scope and diversity of HE in the UK, as polytechnics traditionally focused on vocational and technical education now had the opportunity to expand their academic offerings and research capabilities (Tight, 2009).

The Conservative government's Education Act 1992 paved the way for polytechnics and colleges of higher education to become universities (Jobbins, 2013).

**Table 01: Polytechnic to University status**

Polytechnic	Granted University Status
Anglia Ruskin	Anglia Ruskin University
Brighton	University of Brighton
Coventry	Coventry University
De Montfort	De Montfort University
East London	University of East London
Greenwich	University of Greenwich
Hertfordshire	University of Hertfordshire
Kingston	Kingston University
Leeds Metropolitan	Leeds Metropolitan University
Manchester Metropolitan	Manchester Metropolitan University
Northumbria	Northumbria University
Oxford Brookes	Oxford Brookes University
Plymouth	Plymouth University
Sheffield Hallam	Sheffield Hallam University
Teesside	Teesside University
West of England	University of West of England

Source: Author's own selection based on alphabetical representation without prejudice

Furthermore, the Act unified higher education funding under the newly established Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs), streamlining the funding process and fostering a more competitive environment among institutions (Taggart, 2004). This competition was intended to drive improvements in quality and efficiency within the sector (Taylor & Watson, 2003).

Additionally, the Act abolished the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), which had previously been responsible for validating degrees at polytechnics and other non-university institutions. The dissolution of the CNAA marked a shift towards a more integrated higher education system where universities themselves took on the role of awarding degrees (Scott, 2014).

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 also crucially enabled the establishment of new private HEIs, contributing to a diversification of the educational landscape.

Overall, the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 played a crucial role in reshaping the landscape of further and higher education in the UK. By promoting greater institutional autonomy, enhancing competition for funding, and unifying the higher education funding framework, the Act set the stage for significant growth and diversification within the sector (Marginson, 2006). These changes' long-term impact continues to influence UK educational institutions' governance and operation today.

The period from 1997 to 1998 was marked by transformative changes in HE funding in the United Kingdom, primarily influenced by the Dearing Report (1997) recommendations and subsequent policy decisions by the Labour government.

In 1997, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, published a comprehensive report that profoundly influenced the higher education landscape. The Dearing Report recommended the introduction of tuition fees as a means to ensure the financial sustainability of public HEIs while expanding access to higher education. It argued that students, as primary beneficiaries of higher education, should contribute to its cost, thereby sharing the financial burden with the state (Dearing, 1997). Furthermore, the report recommended replacing maintenance awards with loans for all but the poorest students, asserting that this approach would make HE funding more equitable and sustainable in the long run.

Following the Dearing Report's recommendations, the Labour government implemented significant changes under Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998. The government introduced tuition fees of £1,000 per year, marking the first time that students in the UK were required to pay for their tuition. This policy shift aimed to increase funding for universities, which had been struggling with financial constraints, and to enhance the quality of education provided (Barr, 2004). Additionally, the government abolished the remaining student grants, replacing them with a system of loans. This move was intended to make HE more accessible by providing students with the financial means to support themselves during their studies, albeit with the obligation to repay these loans after graduation (Callender, 2006).

These policy changes sparked considerable debate and controversy. Proponents argued that the introduction of tuition fees and the shift to loans were necessary steps to modernise the HE funding system and ensure its sustainability. They contended that these measures would enable universities to improve their facilities and services, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education (Greenaway & Haynes, 2003). Critics, however, raised concerns about the potential negative impact on access to higher education, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They argued that the increased financial burden could deter



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potential students from pursuing higher education and exacerbate social inequalities (Wilkins et al., 2013).

The period marked a significant shift in the UK's higher education funding model, laying the groundwork for future reforms and debates. The introduction of tuition fees and replacing grants with loans reflected broader trends towards marketisation and privatisation in the public sector, influencing subsequent policy developments in higher education.

In the late 1990s, the Labour government recognised the potential of British higher education as a valuable export. The launch of the first phase of the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI) in 1999 aimed at promoting British education on the global stage and attracting international students (Beatrice, 2007). The Labour government introduced policies that not only aimed to enhance the quality and appeal of UK education but also to simplify the processes for international students to study in the UK. These efforts were designed to ensure that the UK remained a competitive and attractive destination for higher education.

The growth of PrHEIs in the 1990s was also fueled by increasing student demand for alternative pathways to higher education. As the number of traditional university places remained limited, PrHEIs provided a viable option for those who needed to meet the stringent entry requirements or who sought a different educational experience. This demand was further amplified by the growing recognition of the value of lifelong learning and the need for upskilling and reskilling in a rapidly changing economy.

### **Decade 2: 2000-2010 - Expansion of PrHEIs**

The first decade of the 21st century saw an emergence of PrHEIs in the UK. Building on the foundations laid in the 1990s, PrHEIs expanded their programme offerings, attracting a more comprehensive range of students, including international students with diverse interests and career aspirations.

One notable trend during the 2000s was the increasing emphasis on recruiting international students at PrHEIs in the United Kingdom. Recognising the critical importance of international students to the financial sustainability and global reputation of HEIs, PrHEIs intensified their efforts to attract a large number of students from abroad (Qureshi, 2020). This shift was driven by several factors, including diversifying revenue streams, enhancing cultural diversity within campuses, and bolstering the institutions' international rankings (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

During this decade, PrHEIs began to carve out a niche by offering a range of programmes and degrees that differed from traditional universities. These programmes often focused on vocational skills, professional certifications, and specialised areas of study that catered to the evolving needs of the workforce. The appeal of these institutions lies in their ability to offer flexible learning options, smaller class sizes, and a more personalised approach to education. In addition to that PrHEIs offered MBA at much reduced tuition fee as compared to PuHEIs, therefore, these institutions attracted a large number of international students. Qureshi (2020) made a comparison of Master of Business Administration (MBA) tuition fees at Public and Private HEIs which can be seen in the following tables (02 and 03).

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**Table 02: Fees in PuHEIs in London (MBA)**

S.NO	Name of PuHEIs	Tuition Fee 2017/18
1	Durham University	£28,000
2	Cranfield University	£ 36,000
3	Imperial College London	£ 47,000
4	Warwick University	£ 35,650
5	University of Oxford	£52,000
6	University of Manchester	£ 42,000
7	London Business School	£75,100
8	University of Cambridge	£51,000
9	London School of Economic Trium MBA	\$175,500
10	University of Chester	£11,205

Source: Qureshi (2020)

The above table shows the huge variation of tuition fee differences among PuHEIs from minimum around £11,000 to more than £ 100,000. The tuition fee structures of PrHEIs in the UK are notably competitive, with significantly less variation compared to PuHEIs. While the fees at PuHEIs can range dramatically from £10,000 to as high as £100,000 depending on the course and institution (Smith & Hillman, 2019), PrHEIs typically maintain a more consistent and affordable fee structure.

MBA tuition fee at PrHEIs in table (03) below.

**Table 03: Fees in PrHEIs in London (MBA)**

S.NO	Name of PrHEI	Tuition Fee 2017/18
1	The University of Buckingham	£ 10,350
2	Arden University	£ 9,855
3	University of Law	£ 11,900
4	London School of Business and Finance	£ 8,500
5	BPP	£ 11,000
6	London School of Commerce	£6,950

Source: Qureshi (2020)

For instance, MBA tuition fees at PrHEIs generally range from £7,000 to £11,000, presenting a more predictable and accessible financial commitment for students. This streamlined fee structure is a strategic advantage for PrHEIs, making higher education more affordable for a broader demographic, including international students.

A notable example is the London School of Commerce, which offers one of the most affordable MBA programmes in the country, with tuition fees set at just £6,950. This competitive pricing is part of a broader trend among PrHEIs to attract a diverse student body by providing quality education at lower costs. According to Brown and Scott (2020), this pricing strategy not only helps in maintaining enrolment numbers but also ensures a steady stream of revenue, essential for the sustainability and growth of PrHEIs. In conclusion, the tuition fee structures at PrHEIs are a key differentiator from their public counterparts, offering a more consistent and affordable financial pathway to higher education.



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Most of PrHEIs offered multiple intakes, therefore become popular among international students.

**Table 04: Fees in PrHEIs in London (MBA)**

S.NO	Private Higher Education Institute	No of Intakes
1	London School of Commerce	6
2	Kaplan International College London	6
4	BPP	4
5	The University of Buckingham	4
6	Arden University	4
7	The University of Law	4

Source: Qureshi (2020)

The influx of international students was seen as a vital source of income, particularly as these students often pay higher tuition fees compared to domestic students and considered cash cows (Choudaha, 2017, Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). This additional revenue enabled PrHEIs to invest in infrastructure and academic programmes, thereby improving the overall quality of education offered (OECD, 2012). Moreover, international students contributed to creating a multicultural learning environment, enriching the educational experience for all students and preparing them for a globalised workforce (Marginson, 2006).

PrHEIs employed various strategies to attract international students, including forming partnerships with overseas educational institutions, establishing international campuses, and investing in targeted marketing campaigns (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). They also focused on developing programmes that catered to international students' specific needs and preferences, such as offering courses in English, providing comprehensive support services, and ensuring compliance with visa regulations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Furthermore, the UK government's policies played a significant role in facilitating this trend. Initiatives such as introducing the Tier 4 (General) student visa and the Post-Study Work Visa made the UK an attractive destination for international students seeking quality education and post-graduation employment opportunities (Findlay et al., 2012). These policies were designed to enhance the UK's competitiveness in the global education market and to attract top talent from around the world.

In conclusion, the 2000s witnessed a marked increase in the recruitment of international students by PrHEIs in the UK. This trend was driven by the financial benefits, the desire to enhance institutional prestige, and the broader goal of fostering a diverse and inclusive educational environment. The proactive efforts of PrHEIs, supported by favorable government policies, have significantly shaped the landscape of higher education in the UK, positioning it as a leading destination for international students.

### **Decade 3: 2011-2021 Reforms and New Business Model**

The decade from 2011 to 2021 was characterised by recognising students as customers and at the heart of the system, significant turbulence and transformation in the UK higher education sector, particularly within PrHEIs. This period witnessed the revocation of Tier 4

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licenses, the emergence of new business models such as franchising, and the establishment of new private universities with degree-awarding powers.

### **Students at the Heart of the System**

The UK government's White Paper, "Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System," published in June 2011, marked a significant shift in the higher education landscape, emphasising the centrality of student satisfaction and experience in the sector. This policy document laid the groundwork for extensive reforms to reshape the higher education system to better serve students, ensuring that their needs and preferences became the primary drivers of institutional practices and policies (Qureshi, 2020).

At the core of the White Paper was the notion of empowering students as customers in the higher education marketplace (Guilbault, 2016 & 2018, Qureshi, 2020; Qureshi et al., 2021). This customer-centric approach sought to increase transparency and accountability, giving students more information and control over their educational choices (Zia et al., 2023). Key measures included the introduction of the Key Information Set (KIS), which provided prospective students with detailed data on courses, including costs, employment outcomes, and student satisfaction ratings (HEFCE, 2012). By making this information readily available, the government aimed to enable students to make more informed decisions about their education, fostering competition among institutions to improve their offerings (Qureshi, 2020). The emphasis on student satisfaction was further reinforced through the expansion of the National Student Survey (NSS), which collected feedback from final-year undergraduate students on various aspects of their university experience. The results of the NSS became a crucial metric for assessing institutional performance, influencing university rankings and funding allocations. Institutions were thus incentivised to enhance the quality of their teaching, facilities, and support services to improve their NSS scores and attract more students.

Importantly, the conceptualisation of student satisfaction within this framework involves both the short-term pleasure of the academic journey and the long-term pride of securing a job primarily based on the student's academic qualifications (Qureshi et al., 2021). By focusing on immediate academic experiences and future employment prospects, the White Paper's initiatives aimed to ensure that student satisfaction was not only about the quality of education but also about the outcomes that education facilitated.

However, the shift towards a market-driven approach in higher education also raised concerns about the potential commodification of education and the pressures on institutions to prioritise student satisfaction at the expense of academic rigour and autonomy. Critics argued that focusing on customer satisfaction might lead to a "customer is always right" mentality, where institutions feel compelled to cater to student demands even when they conflict with academic standards or long-term educational goals.

### **Bogus PrHEIs and Revocation of Tier 4 Licences**

A study by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) identified 674 private providers in the UK in 2011–12 and estimated that 160,000 students were undertaking higher education courses at these institutions. While the rapid growth of PrHEIs in the UK in the 2000s offered increased choice and flexibility to students, it has also led to a rise in bogus

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institutions exploiting the Tier 4 student visa system.

Bogus PrHEIs are educational establishments that lack proper accreditation, offer substandard education, and primarily exist to facilitate visa fraud (Hrg, 2004, Basnet, 2016). They often lure international students with promises of easy admission and quick visas, exploiting their desire to study in the UK (Allen, 2001). These institutions typically have minimal teaching facilities and unqualified staff and engage in fraudulent practices like falsifying attendance records and providing fake qualifications (Naidu & Derani, 2016).

The issue of bogus PrHEIs exploiting the Tier 4 visa system to bring in non-genuine students has been a significant concern in the UK. These institutions, often called "visa mills," have sought to capitalise on the lucrative international student recruitment market without providing legitimate educational services (North, 2012). The phenomenon of bogus PrHEIs has posed severe challenges to the integrity of the UK's HE sector and immigration system.

One of the most significant regulatory changes during this period was revoking Tier 4 licenses, which had profound implications for many PrHEIs. The Tier 4 (General) student visa system, which allowed international students to study in the UK, was subjected to stricter scrutiny and tighter regulations. This was part of the UK government's efforts to curb immigration abuse and ensure that only bona fide educational institutions could host international students (Home Office, 2012). As a result, several PrHEIs lost their Tier 4 licenses, dramatically affecting their ability to recruit and retain international students.

### **Exploitation of the Tier 4 Visa System**

The Tier 4 (General) student visa system was designed to facilitate the entry of genuine international students into the UK to pursue higher education. However, the system was vulnerable to exploitation by fraudulent institutions. These bogus PrHEIs primarily aimed to profit from the visa fees and tuition payments of students more interested in obtaining UK residency than in actual academic pursuits (Hrg, 2004, Basnet, 2016). The institutions often offered substandard or non-existent educational programmes, focusing instead on the financial transactions involved (Home Office, 2014).

### **Regulatory Response and Impact**

The UK government, recognising the abuse of the Tier 4 visa system, initiated a series of regulatory measures to curb the activities of these fraudulent institutions. One of the critical responses was the implementation of more stringent oversight and accreditation requirements the abolition of the UKBA, denial of work rights and restriction to work to international students.

### **Quality Assurance: From Accreditation Bodies to QAA**

The landscape of quality assurance in the private higher education sector also underwent a transformation. Previously, various accreditation bodies oversaw quality standards, but this changed with the increased role of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA's focus on a unified quality framework brought consistency and rigour to the sector. However, it also raised concerns about the potential for a one-size-fits-all approach that might not fully accommodate the diverse nature of private institutions.

**Abolition of the UKBA and the Creation of UKVI**

The restructuring plan involved the abolition of the UKBA and the absorption of its functions back into the Home Office. This move followed the separation of the Border Force from the UKBA in 2012, which had already indicated the need for more streamlined and efficient management of border security and immigration control (Gower, 2014). The UKBA officially lost its executive agency status on 1 April 2013.

On 26 March 2013, the Home Secretary announced a significant restructuring of the UK immigration system, driven by persistent concerns regarding the performance and effectiveness of the UKBA. This decision came after years of criticism and operational challenges that questioned the agency's capacity to manage the complex landscape of UK immigration and border security (Gower, 2014).

As part of the restructuring, the Home Office established two new directorates: UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) and Immigration Enforcement. UKVI was tasked with handling applications for leave to enter or remain in the UK, focusing on improving the efficiency and reliability of the visa application process. This directorate aims to provide a high level of customer service, ensuring that genuine applicants can navigate the visa system more effectively (Gower, 2014).

**Immigration Enforcement**

The second directorate, Immigration Enforcement, was created to handle the enforcement of immigration laws and the removal of individuals who were in the UK illegally. This division focuses on maintaining the integrity of the UK's immigration system by ensuring compliance with immigration rules and pursuing cases of unlawful residency and employment.

**Denial of Work Rights: Impact on International Students**

Another significant development was the removal of post-study work rights for international students in 2012. This decision aimed to curb immigration numbers but sparked controversy due to its potential negative impact on the UK's economy and its attractiveness to international talent. The loss of work opportunities post-graduation made studying in the UK less appealing for some international students, forcing private institutions to rethink their value propositions and offer alternative career support services (Redden, 2012).

**Restrictions on Work Rights**

Under the revised regulations, the right to work while studying on a Tier 4 visa was restricted to individuals enrolled at publicly funded educational institutions. The permissible number of work hours was contingent upon the level of study, with stricter limitations imposed on lower-level qualifications. In contrast, students attending private colleges were prohibited from engaging in any form of employment. This measure was designed to curb the exploitation of the Tier 4 visa for employment purposes rather than genuine academic pursuits.

**Tightening of Language Requirements**

The government also revised the language proficiency requirements for visa applicants. The required level of English language competence was raised from A2 to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (European Parliament, 2013).

However, universities were exempt from these language requirements. The rationale for this exemption was that universities are best equipped to assess and determine the language proficiency needs of their students, given their role in providing higher education and ensuring academic standards.

**Rationale for the Reform**

The decision to dismantle the UKBA and create UKVI was largely driven by its failure to address the increasing complexities of the UK immigration system. The UKBA had faced substantial criticism for its handling of visa applications, backlog of cases, and overall inefficiency in processing and enforcement. These issues were seen as significant impediments to both national security and the economic interests tied to immigration and international education.

In her statement, the Home Secretary highlighted the need for a more focused and effective approach to immigration management. By splitting the UKBA's functions into two distinct entities, the government aimed to enhance accountability, improve operational efficiency, and ensure that immigration controls were enforced more rigorously (Home Office, 2013).

**Impact on Immigration and Higher Education**

The reformation had significant implications for the higher education sector, particularly for international students and private higher education institutions (PrHEIs). UKVI's role in processing visa applications became crucial in ensuring that genuine students could study in the UK without unnecessary hindrances. The focus on customer service and efficiency aimed to rebuild trust in the visa system, which had been eroded by the UKBA's previous shortcomings.

For PrHEIs, the restructuring also meant stricter compliance requirements and more robust oversight. Institutions sponsoring international students under Tier 4 visas had to adhere to new regulations and demonstrate their commitment to providing quality education and maintaining immigration standards. This shift was part of broader efforts to prevent the abuse of the visa system by bogus institutions and to uphold the reputation of the UK as a destination for high-quality education (Universities UK, 2014).

The Home Office, through the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI), introduced rigorous compliance checks and audits to ensure that Tier 4 sponsors were genuinely operating as educational institutions. Institutions failing to meet these standards faced revocation of their Tier 4 licenses, thereby losing the ability to sponsor international students (Home Office, 2012).

In 2014, the Home Office's Immigration Enforcement division conducted extensive investigations, resulting in the suspension or revocation of Tier 4 licenses for numerous PrHEIs, including a few PuHEIs. The former UK Border Agency (UKBA) took decisive action to address the quality assurance challenges facing private higher education institutions. The former UKBA replaced the old accreditation bodies with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education and the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) for further education.



This action aimed to protect genuine students and maintain the credibility of the UK's education system. Additionally, the introduction of the Review for Educational Oversight (REO) by the QAA and the ISI further strengthened the regulatory framework, ensuring that only reputable institutions could recruit international students (QAA, 2015). The REO was designed to provide a rigorous framework for evaluating the quality and standards of independent higher and further education institutions. This system aimed to ensure that private institutions met high standards of educational quality, addressing previous deficiencies in regulatory oversight. The implementation of the REO represented a significant step towards improving the credibility and accountability of private higher education providers in the UK.

The most recent report by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) (2016b) identified a total of 713 private higher education (HE) providers operating within the United Kingdom. This comprehensive report provided a detailed analysis of the private HE sector, highlighting its significant role in widening participation in higher education.

The DBIS report underscored that private HE providers are instrumental in enrolling more non-traditional/mature students than public sector institutions. This emphasis on widening participation reflects the sector's commitment to providing educational opportunities to a diverse student body, including individuals who may not have followed the traditional pathways into higher education. By catering to the needs of mature students, private HE providers play a crucial role in promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the overall inclusivity of the higher education system.

### **Emergence of New Business Model (Franchising)**

Franchising is a business model in which a company (the franchisor) authorises another entity (the franchisee) to use its brand name, trademarks, and business framework in return for a fee. This model has been extensively employed across numerous industries, such as fast food, retail, and hospitality. More recently, franchising has also been adopted in the higher education sector (Khawaja, 2024).

In response to regulatory challenges, many PrHEIs adopted franchising as a business model. Established universities partnered with PrHEIs to offer degree programmes through franchising, allowing PrHEIs to leverage their partner universities' brand and academic standards. This model expanded the reach of established universities and provided PrHEIs with a pathway to offer accredited degree programmes without directly obtaining degree-awarding powers. This model focused on recruiting mature/non-traditional students.

The term 'mature student' refers to anyone going to college or university after some time out of full-time education. Typically, this will mean students who are over 21 years of age at the beginning of their undergraduate studies or over 25 years of age at the beginning of their postgraduate studies (UCAS, 2020) and up to pensionable age (NUS, 2012). McCune et al. (2010) define younger mature students as aged 21–30 and older mature students as 31 or over.

Many PrHEIs adopted new business model in response to challenges recruiting international students and Tier 4 licence, making franchising increasingly popular.



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In the UK, franchising has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Several universities have entered into franchise agreements with further education colleges and private providers (Khawaja, 2024). In academic franchise agreements, HEIs provide the curriculum, learning materials, quality assurance and, most important, the right to award a degree. (Altbach, 2023).

Altbach (2023) observes that in academic franchise agreements, HEIs furnish the curriculum, learning materials, quality assurance mechanisms, and the authority to confer degrees upon successful programme completion.

**Table 05: List of UK Franchisor and Franchisee**

UK Private Provider (Franchisee)	UK HEI (Franchiser)
1. Al-Maktoum College of Higher Education	Abertay University, University of Dundee
2. Applied Business Academy	University of West London, Leeds Trinity University, The University of Buckingham
3. Elizabeth School of London	St Mary's University, Canterbury Christ Church University, University of Bolton, Bath Spa University
4. Global Banking School (GBS)	Oxford Brookes University, Pearson, Canterbury Christ Church University, Bath Spa University, University of Suffolk, Leeds Trinity University
5. London School of Commerce (LSC)	University of Bedfordshire, University of Suffolk, New College Durham, Canterbury Christ Church University, Mistr University for Science & Technology (MUST)
6. London School of Science and Technology (LSST)	University of Bedfordshire, University of Suffolk, New College Durham, Canterbury Christ Church University, Mistr University for Science & Technology (MUST)
7. Magna Carta College	University of West London, Buckinghamshire New University, De Montfort University
8. Met Film School	Buckinghamshire New University, Pearson
9. Oxford Business College (OBC)	Buckinghamshire New University, University of West London, New College of Durham, Ravensbourne University London, University of South Wales, London Metropolitan University, Solent University
10. QA Higher Education	University of West London, Plymouth MARJON University
11. UK College of Business and Computing (UKCBC)	University of Bedfordshire, University of Suffolk, New College Durham, Canterbury Christ Church University, Mistr University for Science & Technology (MUST)

Source: Khawaja (2024)

A report by the National Audit Office (NAO) found that the number of students enrolled at franchised providers more than doubled between 2018 and 2022 and that eight lead providers were responsible for 91% of this growth (NAO, 2024). This raises concerns about the concentration of power in the sector and the potential for a few universities to dominate the market.

### Navigating Challenges and Embracing Opportunities

Despite these challenges, the UK's private higher education sector has demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Many institutions have successfully navigated the changing regulatory landscape, implemented robust quality assurance mechanisms, and diversified their student recruitment strategies to mitigate the impact of visa restrictions.

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The sector has also embraced opportunities presented by technological advancements, offering flexible online and blended learning options to cater to a wider range of students. Additionally, many private institutions have forged stronger partnerships with industries to enhance employability outcomes for graduates.

### Looking Ahead: A Dynamic Future

As the UK's private higher education sector enters a new decade, it faces both challenges and opportunities. The ongoing impact of Brexit, the global pandemic, and evolving student preferences will continue to shape the landscape. However, the sector's ability to adapt and innovate suggests a promising future.

With a focus on quality, flexibility, and employability, private institutions can continue to play a vital role in providing diverse educational pathways and contributing to the UK's economic and social development. The next chapter in the story of UK private higher education promises to be one of continued evolution and growth.

In March 2019, the government of the United Kingdom formulated a comprehensive strategy to enhance the country's preeminent position in the global higher education market. This initiative aimed to increase the number of international students studying in the UK by over 30 percent. The strategy was designed not only to attract a larger international student body but also to significantly boost the financial contributions of educational exports. The government's target was to elevate the revenue generated from educational exports to £35 billion, thereby reinforcing the economic impact of the UK's higher education sector on the national economy (UK Government, 2019). This strategic move underscores the UK's commitment to maintaining and expanding its global influence in education while also addressing the economic benefits derived from a diverse and substantial international student population.

The expansion of the private higher education sector in the United Kingdom aligns with a broader global trend, as noted by Middlehurst and Fielden (2014). A significant indicator of this growth is the substantial increase in the number of private higher education institutions granted degree-awarding powers. Historically, the University of Buckingham stood as the sole private university with such authority. However, within less than a decade, this number has surged to over ten institutions, reflecting the dynamic transformation and increasing prominence of private entities in the UK's higher education landscape (Qureshi, 2020). This shift underscores the evolving nature of higher education and highlights the sector's responsiveness to the demands of a globalized educational market.

The UK government has initiated policies to support the growth of the private higher education sector, primarily aiming to enhance choice and competition within the higher education market (Higher Education and Research Act, 2017; Crossick, 2010). A significant outcome of this policy is the marked increase in the number of reputable private higher education institutions (PrHEIs).

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In July 2010, just three months after coming to power, the previous Government (Conservative) created the first new private university in over 30 years when it conferred university college status on BPP. Following this, in June 2012, the criteria for the granting of university status was changed to allow smaller institutions to qualify.

A decade ago, the University of Buckingham was the sole private university in existence. Today, there are over ten distinguished PrHEIs in the country, reflecting the success of these governmental initiatives in diversifying and expanding the higher education landscape. This growth not only provides more options for students but also fosters a competitive environment that can drive up the quality of education across the sector.

The list of these reputable PrHEIs includes:

1. Arden University
2. Ashridge Business School
3. BPP University
4. Ifs University
5. New College of the Humanities
6. Regent's University
7. London Institute of Banking & Finance
8. The Richmond University
9. The University of Law
10. University of Buckingham
11. University College of Estate Management
12. University College of Osteopathy

Source: Zia et al; 2023

Further advancing this trend, Resource Development International (RDI), now known as Arden University, was awarded university status on August 5, 2015 (Times Higher Education, 2015). Arden University's recognition as a university represents a pivotal development in the expansion of private higher education, highlighting the increasing acceptance and integration of private institutions within the UK's educational framework. Additionally, the entry of major international educational companies such as Kaplan and Pearson into the UK private higher education sector underscores the global nature of this trend. Kaplan, a renowned provider of educational services, and Pearson, a leading global learning company, have established a significant presence, bringing with them extensive experience and resources that contribute to the growth and diversification of the sector. Some, such as BPP University, are for-profit, while others, such as the University of Law, have charitable status. Only one, the University of Buckingham, offers a similar range of courses to public universities. Since then, the University of Law has demonstrated considerable growth and development. It now boasts fourteen campuses, thirteen of which are located across the United Kingdom, with an additional international campus in Hong Kong. This expansion illustrates the university's strategic vision to extend its reach and influence both domestically and internationally, providing accessible and high-quality legal education to a broader audience.

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The University of Law's trajectory exemplifies the broader trend of privatization and market-driven expansion within the UK's higher education sector, driven by government policies aimed at increasing diversity, choice, and competition. This trend has not only attracted significant private investment but has also fostered the proliferation of private higher education institutions, contributing to a more dynamic and competitive educational landscape.

The enactment of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 has been a pivotal moment in shaping the UK's higher education landscape. This legislation has facilitated the entry of new higher education providers, thereby fostering a more diverse and dynamic sector. It has allowed for the proliferation of private institutions with degree-awarding powers, contributing to a pluralistic and competitive environment that better serves the varied needs of a global student population.

However, the rapid expansion of private higher education institutions (PrHEIs) brings with it significant challenges that necessitate rigorous quality assurance and regulatory oversight. Ensuring that these new providers meet high educational standards is crucial to protecting student interests and maintaining the integrity of the UK's higher education system. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Office for Students (OfS) play essential roles in this regulatory framework, setting benchmarks and conducting assessments to uphold academic excellence.

The rise of private institutions with awarding powers signals a shift towards a more inclusive and competitive higher education market. This transformation is not merely about increasing the number of providers but also about enhancing the quality and variety of educational offerings. It enables a wider array of educational models and specializations, catering to the diverse preferences and requirements of both domestic and international students.

Nevertheless, the expansion must be carefully managed to balance innovation and growth with stringent quality control. The aim is to ensure that all institutions, regardless of their public or private status, adhere to the same high standards of education and student support. This balance is vital for sustaining the UK's reputation for excellence in higher education on the global stage.

In conclusion, while the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 has paved the way for a more varied and dynamic higher education sector, it also highlights the necessity for ongoing vigilance and robust regulatory measures. By ensuring that all institutions maintain high standards, the UK can continue to offer world-class education that meets the evolving needs of a diverse student body, thus preserving the integrity and excellence of its higher education system. As a result of the UK government's initiatives to develop private higher education, The College of Law became the first private higher education institution (PrHEI) to be sold to a private equity firm in April 2012. This pivotal transaction underscored the increasing role of private investment in the higher education sector.

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Subsequently, in November 2012, the institution was granted university status and rebranded as the "University of Law." This elevation to university status marked a significant milestone, reflecting the institution's expanded capabilities and commitment to higher education.

These developments reflect a strategic effort to enhance the quality, accessibility, and competitiveness of higher education in the UK, aligning with global trends towards privatization and market-driven education models. The increased presence of reputable private universities and educational companies signifies a dynamic shift in the higher education landscape, aimed at meeting the diverse needs of a globalized student population and fostering innovation in educational delivery.

Another significant player in the independent higher education sector is the London School of Commerce (LSC). This institution has experienced rapid growth, not only within the United Kingdom, with notable campuses in London and Birmingham, but also internationally across Europe and Asia. LSC's respected global footprint includes campuses in Malta, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. This expansion highlights LSC's commitment to providing accessible, high-quality education on an international scale, catering to a diverse student body and adapting to the global demand for higher education.

In addition to LSC, other prominent independent higher education providers have emerged, further enriching the UK's educational landscape. Oxford Business College, known for its rigorous business programs and commitment to student success, has become a respected name in business education. Similarly, the Global Banking School has established itself as a leader in banking and finance education, offering specialized programs that prepare students for the complexities of the global financial system.

Elizabeth School of London also deserves mention for its innovative approach to higher education. This institution has carved out a niche by providing tailored programs that meet the evolving needs of students and employers alike, emphasizing practical skills and real-world applications.

The expansion and success of these independent higher education providers are indicative of a broader trend influenced by the UK government's policies aimed at diversifying and enhancing the higher education sector. The initiatives have fostered an environment where private institutions can thrive, thereby increasing the variety of educational opportunities available to students. This has not only heightened competition but also driven improvements in the quality and accessibility of higher education across the country and beyond.

### Conclusion

The evolution of private higher education in the UK over the past three decades has been nothing short of remarkable. From its humble beginnings in the 1990s to its current position as a vibrant and diverse sector, private higher education has played a significant role in expanding educational opportunities, enhancing the employability of graduates, and contributing to the UK's reputation as a global leader in education.

As the sector continues to evolve, it is likely to face new challenges and opportunities. The increasing use of technology, the growing demand for lifelong learning, and the changing nature of work are all likely to have a profound impact on the future of private higher education. However, with its track record of innovation and adaptability, the sector is well-positioned to navigate these challenges and continue to thrive in the years to come.

The growth of awarding power institutions in the UK over the past four decades represents a significant shift in the higher education landscape. Four decades ago, the University of Buckingham stood alone as the sole private university with degree-awarding powers. Today, the number has increased to nearly twenty, reflecting the UK's evolving approach to higher education. This expansion has been driven by various factors, including government policies aimed at increasing competition, enhancing educational quality, and broadening access to higher education.

Franchising in higher education presents a complex issue with both advantages and challenges. On the one hand, it can significantly expand access to education, allowing institutions to reach a broader and more diverse student population. This expansion can also lead to increased revenue streams for both the franchising institution (franchisor) and the partner institutions (franchisees). However, franchising raises several critical concerns. There are persistent worries about maintaining educational quality, as dispersing academic programs across various locations can result in inconsistent delivery and outcomes. Additionally, the process often needs more transparency, complicating efforts to monitor and ensure uniform standards.



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Shahid Hafeez is a distinguished figure in the educational consultancy field, serving as the Chairman of ASFE Consultants UK since 2010. With over a decade of dedicated experience, Shahid has been instrumental in shaping the educational trajectories of countless students, providing expert guidance and strategic insights to navigate the complexities of higher education.

Under his leadership, ASFE Consultants UK has emerged as a trusted name in the educational consultancy sector. The firm specialises in offering comprehensive consulting services to students aspiring to pursue higher education domestically and internationally. Shahid's profound understanding of the educational landscape and his commitment to excellence have driven ASFE Consultants to achieve remarkable success and recognition.

Shahid's expertise spans various educational services, including university admissions, career counseling, and academic planning. His personalised approach and unwavering dedication to his clients' success have earned him a stellar reputation among students, parents, and educational institutions alike.

A visionary leader, Shahid continuously strives to innovate and expand the services offered by ASFE Consultants UK, ensuring that students receive the highest quality of support and guidance. His passion for education and relentless pursuit of excellence makes him a respected and influential figure in educational consultancy.

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