



Master of Public Health

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The Value of Inclusive Higher Education: Cost-Benefit Analysis and Health Implications for Autistic Graduates Without Intellectual Impairment in France

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List of Acronyms

<i>AAH</i>	Allocation aux adultes Handicapés (<i>Adults Disability Allowance</i>)
<i>AP-HP</i>	Assistance Publique - Hôpitaux de Paris (<i>Public Assistance - Paris Hospitals</i>)
<i>APL</i>	Aides Personnalisée au Logement (<i>Personalized Housing Assistance</i>)
<i>ASD</i>	Autism Spectrum Disorder
<i>BCR</i>	Benefit-Cost Ratio
<i>CAF</i>	Caisse d'Allocation Familiale (Family Allowance Fund)
<i>CBA</i>	Cost-Benefit Analysis
<i>CPEC</i>	Care Policy and Evaluation Centre
<i>DRESS</i>	Direction de la Recherche de Études de l'Évaluation et des Statistiques (<i>French Department of Research, Studies, Evaluation and Statistics</i>)
<i>DSM-5</i>	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5 th Edition
<i>ICD-11</i>	International Classification of Diseases, 11 th Revision
<i>INSEE</i>	Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (<i>National Institut of Statistics and Economic Studies</i>)
<i>MESR</i>	Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche (<i>Ministry of Higher Education and Research</i>)
<i>NPV</i>	Net Present Value
<i>OECD</i>	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
<i>ROI</i>	Return on Investment
<i>RSA</i>	Revenu de Solidarité Active (<i>Active Solidarity Income</i>)
<i>SMIC</i>	Salaire minimum interprofessionnel de croissance,
<i>SPC</i>	Socio-Professional Category

<i>UNSA</i>	Union National des Syndicats Autonomes (<i>National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions</i>)
<i>URC Eco</i>	<i>Unité de Recherche Clinique en Économie de la Santé</i> (Clinical Research Unit in Health Economics)
<i>URSSAFF</i>	Union de Recouvrement des cotisations de Sécurité Sociales et d'Allocation Familiales (<i>Social Security Allowance and Contribution Collection Agency</i>)
<i>WHO</i>	World Health Organization

Abstract

Context: Autism affects 1 in 100 children globally. Inclusive higher education remains a challenge for autistic individuals without intellectual disability, who face unique academic and social barriers. In France, initiatives such as the Atypie-Friendly program have emerged to improve access, but their economic impact has not yet been assessed. This study aimed to evaluate the economic returns of investing in inclusive higher education for individuals on the autism spectrum without intellectual disability.

Methods: A literature-based cost-benefit analysis was conducted from the French government's perspective as a public investor over a five-year post-graduation horizon (2026–2030). The model estimated public costs (education, foregone tax revenue, and scholarships) and public benefits (tax revenue, social contributions, and savings from reduced reliance on welfare and unemployment support). The analysis included 864 autistic graduates without intellectual disability and explored results by employment sector and socio-professional category (SPC). A two-way sensitivity analysis was performed to test the robustness of the base case scenario. Due to data limitations, several input parameters were based on national averages or literature-informed proxies.

Results

In the baseline scenario (70% employment rate), the total public investment of €128.6 million generated €153 million in benefits, yielding an NPV of €24.4 million, a BCR of 1.19, and an ROI of 18.99%. Scenario 1 (58% employment rate) produced a negative NPV of –€17.3 million, while Scenario 2 (40% repetition rate) resulted in a slightly lower NPV of €23.7 million. The greatest fiscal gains were driven by reduced social transfers and unemployment costs.

Conclusion

Inclusive higher education for autistic students without intellectual disability is a fiscally responsible investment. However, the benefits depend on sustained efforts to ensure academic success and labor market access. Inclusion must go beyond university admission to include coordinated policies and structures supporting full societal participation.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Prevalence

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, behavior, and social interaction (1), with an estimated prevalence of 1 in 100 children globally (2). According to the DSM-5 and ICD-11 classification (two main international classification systems used to diagnose and categorize mental, behavioral, and neurodevelopmental disorders), autism falls under the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and can be attributed to genetics and environmental factors (3–5). Among individuals on the autism spectrum, those without intellectual disability are recognized for their unique cognitive strengths, intense focus, and academic potential.

However, they face significant barriers in accessing and successfully completing higher education (6,7). These barriers are not only academic but also structural and financial, including the need for adapted orientation programs, peer mentoring, staff training, and accessible infrastructure (8)

1.2 Higher Educational Barriers and Socioeconomic Impact

In France, an estimated 700,000 people are on the autism spectrum, including 100,000 children and teenagers (9). To address longstanding gaps in inclusion, the French Government has launched several initiatives to promote inclusion in higher education, including the Atypie-Friendly program (previously Aspie-Friendly), introduced in 2018 as part of the French National Strategy for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders (10). The program focuses on three main goals (11): (1) Improving access to higher education for students with autism without intellectual disability, (2) promoting academic access and socio-professional integration of these students, and (3) coordinating efforts among institutions to share best practices and support tools.

Despite these efforts, many individuals with autism without intellectual disability remain underrepresented and face persistent obstacles to employment and social participation. The economic costs of this lack of access are substantial, resulting from long-term reliance on social welfare, underemployment benefits, and missed societal contributions. An International report, from the Care Policy and Evaluation Centre (CPEC) at the London School of Economics, demonstrated that increasing employment rates among autistic adults through educational inclusion could save between £900 million and £1.5 billion per year in the United Kingdom by reducing welfare payments and increasing tax revenues (12).

1.3 Public Health Relevance

Beyond the economic costs, exclusion from higher education contributes to poorer health outcomes. Indeed, Autistic adults frequently report lower quality of life than the general population, particularly when facing unemployment or social isolation (13,14). Similarly, the 2024 report on autism from the CPEC highlights the mental health challenges experienced by this population, estimating that 50% to 70% suffer from anxiety and depression, conditions associated with higher suicide risk and greater use of healthcare services. The same report also demonstrated that preventing anxiety-related treatment could save over £2000 per person over ten years, while preventing depression could lead to £317 in savings within just two years (12).

1.4 Study Rationale and Contribution

As the Atypie-Friendly program continues to grow, there is an increasing interest among policymakers, researchers, universities, advocates, and public funders in understanding the economic value of inclusive higher education. While cost-benefit analyses on education and autism have been conducted in the United Kingdom and other countries, there is currently no such equivalence in the French context.

This study, conducted as part of my internship at URC Eco (Health Economics Clinical Research Unit at *AP-HP, Assistance Publique - Hôpitaux de Paris*), was designed to address this gap. Due to data limitations, especially the lack of a longitudinal cohort, the study relied on a literature-based cost-benefit model based on available French indicators with the aim not to evaluate the Atypie-friendly program specifically, but to provide a policy-relevant guide on the potential costs and benefits associated with providing inclusive higher education to autistic students without intellectual disability.

Although cost-benefit analyses in education often span 30 to 40 years (15,16) to reflect lifetime employment trajectories, this study opted for a shorter period to avoid excessive extrapolations related to macroeconomic uncertainties such as inflation, recessions, labor market reforms, and unforeseen societal disruptions (case of COVID-19 that demonstrated the limits of long-range projections and reinforced the value of short to medium-term evidence for better informed decisions as new data emerge) (17). This approach ensures that the projections remain feasible and relevant for current policy decisions.

1.5 Research Aims and Objectives

1.5.1 Primary Objective

The primary objective was to estimate the economic returns of investing in inclusive higher education for individuals with NID

1.5.2 Secondary Objectives

1. To estimate the public costs associated with inclusive higher education of individuals with NID.
2. To estimate the public benefits provided by graduated individuals with NID to the French government.
3. To estimate the Net Present Value (NPV) generated by Autistic without NID graduates through higher education inclusions.

1.6 Technical terms definitions

Public costs: They refer in this thesis to the French government's investment in inclusive education and include:

Direct educational cost: Direct public expenditure by the government to universities for teaching staff salaries, administration and infrastructure costs, and disability related costs.

Scholarship funding: Financial transfers paid directly to students in the form of grants or stipends.

Foregone tax revenue: Taxes the government does not collect because students are not working. It is considered a loss of potential tax income during the study period.

Public benefits: Government revenues and savings generated by autistic graduates with NID's employment as a direct result of public investment in inclusive higher education.

Tax revenue: Taxes the government collects from graduates in the form of income taxes

Social Contributions: Mandatory payment to social security, health insurance, and pensions.

Effect of transfers: Benefit to the French government from reduced spending on social welfare benefits (RSA, AAH, APL) due to graduates' employment.

Unemployment effect: Reduction in government spending on unemployment benefits due to graduates' employment.

2 Methodology

2.1 Study design

A cost-benefit analysis (CBA) was developed to estimate the economic returns associated with inclusive higher education in France, based on the OECD's cost-benefit modelling approach on education investment, as presented in their *Education at a Glance reports* (18–21). The CBA model was structured as a static model to reflect a stable population due to the limited availability of population-specific longitudinal data and the need to generate timely insights for public investment decisions. The static model was built using Microsoft Excel 365.

The CBA was conducted from the perspective of the French State as a public investor using a five-year post-graduation horizon to focus on near-term fiscal impacts. A discount rate of 3% was applied to account for the time value of money, in line with national evaluation guidelines and OECD recommendations (22). The model incorporated public costs and public benefits, and all monetary values were adjusted to constant 2025 euros.

2.2 Study population

The target population for this study comprised students without intellectual disability enrolled in their final year of undergraduate (Bachelor year 3) and postgraduate (Master year 2) within the French public university system.

To ensure feasibility and comparability, the analysis focused on graduates aged 23 to 30, consistent with OECD age averages for higher education completion and early labor market entry (23). However, as several national data sources did not provide age-disaggregated values, age was used as a guide for selecting entry-level salary data rather than as a strict stratification criterion in the model.

Although gender is an important dimension of equity in public health and education, this study did not incorporate gender-based analyses due to data limitations and the scope of available projections.

2.3 Literature Search

This thesis relied on publicly available national and international datasets to inform model input.

Methodological guidance and fiscal return estimation logic were informed by the OECD's cost-benefit frameworks (24) and Eurostat indicators to align the modelling approach with broader European Benchmarks. Education-related expenditures and scholarship funding were obtained from *Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche* (MESR, 2020-2025), providing estimates across degree levels and academic fields. Data on salaries and employment indicators, including average gross annual salaries by education level and socio-professional category (SPC), unemployment, and employment rates, were extracted from *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (INSEE, 2020-2025). For the public sector salary grids, supplementary information was sourced from the Union nationale des syndicats autonomes (UNSA, 2024). Employee tax and social contribution rates for both the public and private sectors were obtained from the *Union de recouvrement des cotisations de sécurité sociale et d'allocations familiales* (URSSAF, 2025).

The data related to public transfer payments including *Revenu de solidarité active* (RSA), *Aide personnalisée au logement* (APL), and *Allocation aux adultes handicapés* (AAH) were drawn from reports from the *Direction de la recherche, des études, de l'évaluation et des statistiques* (DREES, 2023-2024), *Caisse d'allocations familiales* (CAF, 2025) and Mes [Allocs.fr](https://allocs.fr) (2025)

Although most data were sourced from the past five years, earlier studies such as the *Asperanza study*¹ (2017) were used to supplement recent data where necessary, particularly to inform assumptions regarding the academic and professional outcomes of the target population.

2.4 Model Structure

As illustrated in Figure 1, the model traces the analytical progression from academic classification to outcomes, building directly on the defined population of autistic students with NID enrolled in final-year university programs.

¹ A study conducted by the Asperansa association. It was a self-administered questionnaire survey between April 2017 and April 2018, gathering data from 573 participants (415 with complete responses) to identify the living conditions, needs, autonomy, schooling, and employment of autistic adults in France, primarily focusing on individuals diagnosed or self-diagnosed without intellectual disability.

The analysis began by estimating the total number of enrolled students in 2025 using the most recent national enrollment trends from MESR. Students were distributed across degree levels (Bachelor 1–3 and Master 1–2), but only those in their final year (B3 and M2) were included in the analysis. These students were further stratified by academic fields: Humanities & Social Sciences, Law, Economics & Management, and Sciences & Health, according to national distribution (25).

The cost of education for a Master's graduate was calculated over five years, covering the standard three-year Bachelor's (Licence) plus the two-year Master's program, as required by the French higher education system (26,27). For Bachelor's graduates, the cost was calculated based on the three-year duration of the Licence program. Upon graduation, students were mapped to the expected socio-professional categories² (SPC), namely Managers, Associate professionals, Clerical support workers, and Skilled workers, using a multiplicative factor approach³. After being classified by sector of employment (public vs private), these categories were then used to estimate sector-specific salaries and their associated fiscal contribution. The model estimated public returns over a five-year post-graduation period, incorporating tax revenue, social contributions, transfer effects (reduced reliance on social benefits), and unemployment effects (reduced reliance on unemployment benefits due to employment).

2.5 Model Input Parameters

Building on the model structure, the number of autistic students with NID enrolled in French public universities was estimated from the ASD student population reported in the MERS 2022 report (28). In 2022, approximately 1,500 such students were identified, with a reported annual growth rate of 40% (29). The projected student population in 2025 was calculated by applying this growth rate to the 2022 number of students.

The projected 2025 population was then distributed across degree levels using percentages drawn from a comparable thesis⁴ (30): 44% in B1, 21% in B2, 17% in B3, 14% in M1, and 4% in M2. As previously defined, the analysis focused exclusively on students in B3 and M2. These

² Terminology adapted from INSEE.

³ Graduates were allocated to socio-professional categories by multiplying the proportion of each academic field by the observed national rates of transition to each SPC, based on INSEE data

⁴ The 2021 thesis research that explores the occupational performance and inclusion of university students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) without associated intellectual disability in France.

students were further allocated across academic fields using MESR annual reports (2020) on disabled students in higher education (25): 45% in Humanities and Social Sciences, 11% in Law, Economics, and Management, and 44% in Sciences and Health.

Professional outcomes post-graduation were estimated using a multiplicative adjustment approach. This method relied on SPC distribution data observed from the Asperansa's study (31): (35.43% Managers, 7.62% Associate professionals, 48.43% Clerical support workers, 8.52% Skilled workers), adjusted using data from the general graduate population at 18 months post-graduation, reflect the distinct employment integration patterns of the study population. Each SPC was then matched with corresponding gross annual salary estimates, stratified by public and private sector employment, with salary data primarily sourced from INSEE for the private sector (32), and from UNSA for the public sector (33–35).

Annual gross salaries formed the basis for calculating public benefits, including graduates' income tax and social contributions. Reduced reliance on social benefits (RSA, APL, AAH) was estimated based on average annual amounts typically received by non-graduates, assuming graduation would reduce but not eliminate dependency. The effect of unemployment was incorporated by applying the difference between the unemployment rate of non-graduates and graduates, with the graduate unemployment rate assumed to be 60%, consistent with estimates from the literature on employment outcomes for adults with autism in general (36). Public costs were calculated by aggregating, per student, direct educational costs, scholarship funding, and forgone tax revenue. For the forgone tax revenue estimate, entry-level age-related salaries were used as a base.

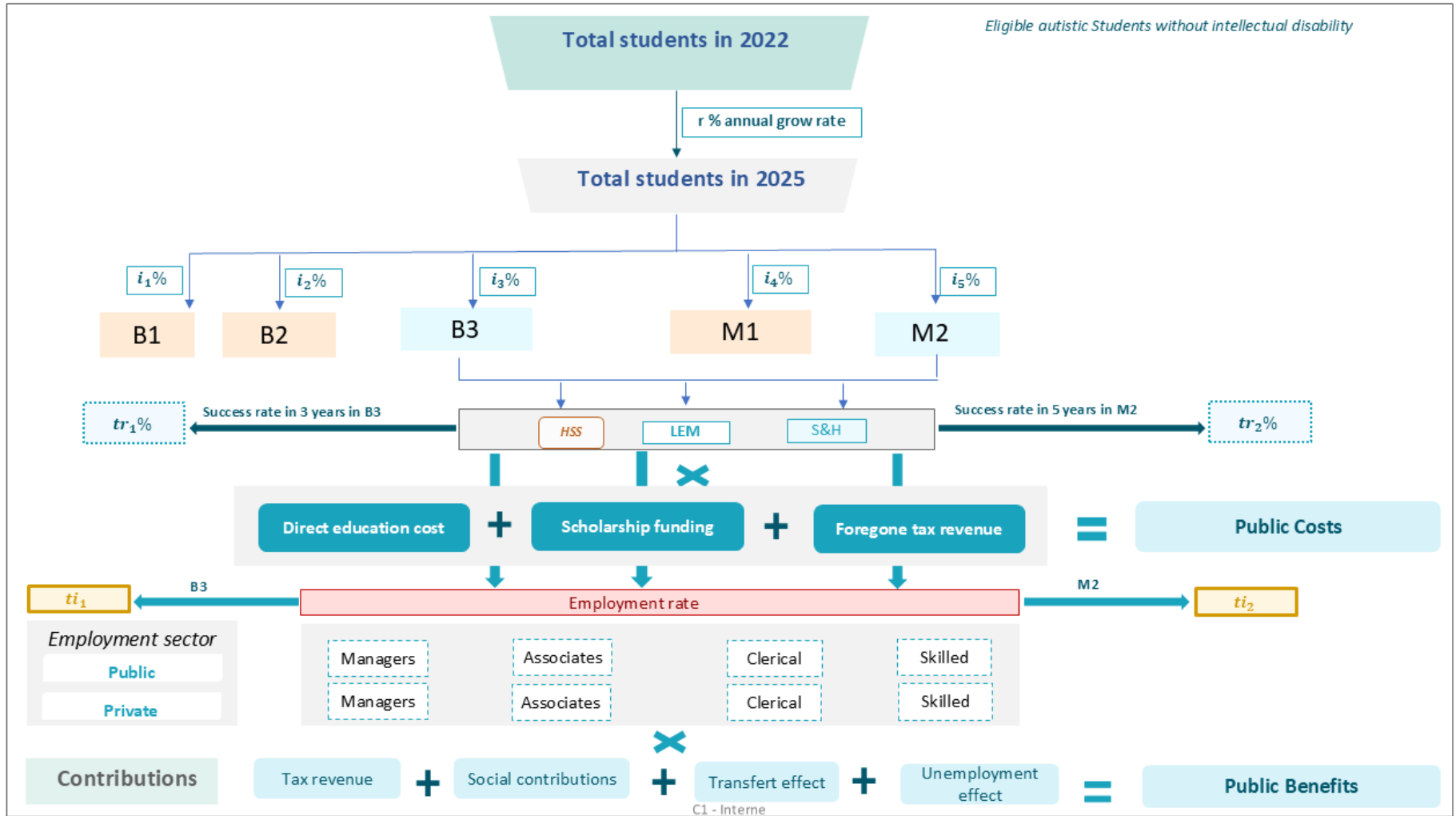


Figure 1: Model Structure

2.6 Outcomes

2.6.1 NPV

The primary outcome of this cost-benefit analysis was the Net Present Value. In line with the study's short-term horizon, the NPV was calculated over five years following graduation. The NPV was calculated as the difference between discounted public benefits and discounted public costs.

$$NPV = \textit{Public benefits} - \textit{Public costs}$$

Public costs were calculated based on the duration of studies (three years for Bachelor's and five years for Master's programs), multiplied by the number of students at B3 and M2 levels across SPC categories. Public benefits were calculated over 5 years post-graduation, multiplying the number of students according to socio-professional category

2.6.2 Public costs

Public costs in this study comprised three key components: Direct educational costs (including disability-related support), Scholarship funding, and Foregone tax revenue during the study year

2.6.2a Direct educational costs

Direct educational costs encompass teaching salaries, infrastructure maintenance, administrative services, and campus services such as libraries, sports, and student life services (37–39). In the absence of budget-specific data for our target population, it was assumed that their base educational costs were equivalent to those of the general student population. However, an extra allocation for disability-related pedagogical support, extracted from the MESR from 2020 to 2022 (25,40) was added. This was done to account for additional needs specific to students with disabilities.

Projection analysis

The annual cost data from MESR for the years 2020–2022 were projected to 2025 by applying the reported annual growth rate (AGR) of 0.7% (37). Thus, the 2022 cost was extrapolated by applying a compound growth formula multiplied by the annual growth factor (1 + 0.7%) raised to the power of three (number of years between 2022 and 2025).

For the additional cost of disability-related pedagogical support, the total budget allocated for this purpose in 2025 (€21.5 million) (41) was used. Due to the lack of enrollment figures for 2025, the

number of students with disabilities from 2024 ($n = 64,000$) (42) was retained under the assumption that no substantial increase would occur between the two years. The per-student disability-related support cost was derived by dividing the total disability-related support budget by the 2024 student count. The per-student amount was then added to the annual educational cost to obtain the total direct cost per autistic student with NID.

2.6.2b Scholarship funding

Scholarship expenditures were estimated using data from the general student population provided by MESR (2020-2022) (25). As no official annual growth rate was available, the average annual growth rate (AGR) between 2020 and 2022 was calculated using the standard compound growth formula. This rate was then used to project scholarship expenditures to 2025 by multiplying the 2022 expenditure by the annual growth factor ($1 + \text{AGR}$) raised to the power of three, corresponding to the number of years between 2022 and 2025.

2.6.2c Foregone Tax Revenue

The foregone tax revenue also refers to loss of productivity from the autistic student during years of study.

To estimate this cost, the projected gross annual full-time equivalent (FTE) salary for individuals holding a secondary school diploma (Baccalauréat or A-level equivalent) was used as a proxy for potential earnings, with salaries for the 25 to 39 age group from INSEE, appropriate for a population without prior employment (43). Salaries in both public and private sectors were projected to 2025 using INSEE's reported annual growth rate of 2.4% (44). The 2021 salary was multiplied by the annual growth factor $(1 + 2.4\%)^4$.

The estimated gross annual salary was then multiplied by a conservative flat tax rate of 10% to approximate the average fiscal contribution of low- to middle-income earners in France, consistent with literature estimates of 8% to 12% (45). (46). While this simplification does not reflect France's progressive tax scale and family quotient adjustments, it provides a reasonable and transparent estimate of the average income tax revenue forgone during the study period.

2.6.3 Public benefits

Public benefits were defined as revenues and savings generated by autistic graduates with NID who completed tertiary education and entered the labor market. These benefits included increased tax revenue and social security contributions as well as reduced reliance on social transfers and unemployment support. All benefits were estimated from 2026 to 2030, considering employment outcomes in both the private and public sectors.

2.6.3a Tax and social contributions

Given the significant variation in employment conditions and salary structures between the private and public sectors, two different salaries and social estimations were made. One accounted for the private sector and the other for the public sector.

2.6.3b Private sector salaries estimation and contribution

Salary data for the private sector was retrieved from INSEE (2022) (47), with distribution provided by decile, median, and quartile. To accurately reflect the early-career earnings of recent graduates first quartile (Q1) of monthly net salaries was selected as Q1. The Q1 threshold represents the salary below which 25% of employees in each socio-professional category fall, making it a robust proxy for entry-level salary (48).

To estimate gross annual salaries, net salaries for each SPC were divided by one minus the social contribution rate of 17%, (URSSAF) (49) then multiplied by 12 months. Salary projections for 2023–2030 were generated using constant annual real growth rates specific to each socio-professional category, based on INSEE long-term trends (1996–2022): 0.10% for Managers, 0.10% for Associate Professionals, 0.40% for Clerical Support Workers, and 0.60% for Skilled Workers. Projected salaries for each year were calculated by multiplying the 2022 salary by one plus the relevant growth rate, raised to the power of the number of years since 2022.

For income tax contributions, flat tax rates were assigned by socio-professional category: 12% for Managers, 8 % for Associate professionals, 5% for both Clerical support workers and Skilled workers, reflecting the progressive nature of the French tax system in which effective tax rates at modest income levels are below statutory marginal rates. These rates were also consistent with effective tax rates observed in official data (22). This approach was used to avoid overestimating fiscal returns from new graduates and maintain model simplicity. Income tax contributions were

calculated by multiplying the annual net income for each category by the corresponding flat tax rate.

2.6.3c Public sector salary estimation and contributions

Public sector salaries were estimated using France's structured civil service pay grid system, which sets compensation levels based on grades and steps (*échelons*) (50). Each step corresponds to a pay index (*indice majoré*) with employees progressing to the next step every 3 to 4 years. Each SPC was matched to a corresponding public civil service category: Category A for Managers, Category B for Associate professionals, Category C for Clerical support workers and Skilled workers.

To calculate the base case gross annual salary for each category, the model used the entry-level pay index, the official 2024 index point (€4.92278) (33–35), and applied a multiplier of 1.30 to account for additional compensation such as bonuses and allowances, not included in the basic salary (51). The final annual gross salary was computed by multiplying the pay index by the point value, then applying the 1.30 adjustment factor, and annualizing over twelve months.

For clarity and feasibility, a simplified constant annual growth rate of 0.3% was applied, reflecting long-term trends in public sector salaries increment over the past decade (52,53). Projecting salaries based on the full pay grid structure would have required detailed simulation of step progression, career mobility, and evolving bonus structures, which was beyond the scope of this analysis. This simplified approach was adopted to ensure transparency and replicability.

Projected salaries for 2025 and 2026 were calculated by multiplying the 2024 salary by $(1 + 0.3\%)^n$.

2.6.3d Transfer effects

The effect of reduced reliance on social transfers captures the public fiscal savings generated when Autistic graduates with NID with higher education require fewer social assistance benefits compared to non-graduates. In other words, higher educational attainment is associated with decreased dependency on government support programs, resulting in measurable public sector savings.

This component of the cost-benefit analysis focused on three key social transfers commonly accessed by individuals with disabilities in France over the period **2026–2030**:

- RSA (Revenu de Solidarité Active)
- AAH (Allocation aux Adultes Handicapés)
- APL (Aide Personnalisée au Logement)

Data Collection and Estimation

Base case monthly amounts for RSA and AAH were retrieved from DRESS datasets (2022-2025) (54,55) and from the MesAllocs.fr 2025 update (56). For AAH, literature indicated that the benefit represented approximately 71% of the net minimum salary (SMIC) in 2023; this same ratio was applied retrospectively to 2022 ($AAH_{2022} = SMIC_{2022} \times 0.71$). For APL, base case was extracted from MESR data on student aid (2020-2022) (57,58), consistent with earlier sections of this thesis.

Growth and Projection

To project benefit amounts for non-graduates in 2026–2030, growth parameters were derived from the literature and national economic indicators:

- The long-term change in the purchasing power of RSA and AAH between 1990 and 2023 (derived from historical Bareme)
- The corresponding average annual growth in purchasing power (derived from the cumulative increase in purchasing power divided by 2023 minus 1990)
- The average annual inflation rate (extracted from INSEE, 2024) (59)
- The combined annual growth rate for each benefit (annual purchasing power growth rate + average inflation rate)
- Relative reduction rate (as defined by the OECD, representing the decrease in benefit reliance due to education)

For APL, in the absence of historical data, a 3% annual growth rate was applied, reflecting IRL (Indice de Référence des Loyers) trends and literature guidance. The annual benefit amounts (monthly $\times 12$) for **2025** were projected to 2026–2030 using:

$$Transfer_{Non-Grad,t} = Transfer_{2025} \times (1 + Growth Rate)^n$$

Adjustment for Graduates

Given their expected income stability and better integration into the workforce, graduates were assumed to rely less on social support. The expected annual transfer amount for graduates was estimated using a Relative Reduction Rate (RRR) derived from OECD findings:

$$Transfer_{t,Grad} = Transfer_{t,Non-Grad} \times (1 - Relative\ Reduction\ Rate)$$

Public Savings calculation

The annual public savings were then determined by subtracting the expected transfer amounts for graduates from those for non-graduates, for each benefit:

$$Savings_t = Transfer_{t,Non-Grad} - Transfer_{t,Grad}$$

The total savings per year across RSA, AAH, and APL were aggregated to yield the yearly benefit:

$$Total\ Savings_t = RSA_{t,Diff} + AAH_{t,Diff} + APL_{t,Diff}$$

2.6.3e Unemployment Effect

The unemployment effect, defined as the reduction in public expenditure on unemployment benefits, was estimated by comparing the unemployment rates of graduates and non-graduates. It was calculated as the product of the unemployment differential, the projected annual gross salary, and the French statutory replacement rate of 40% (60), which reflects the proportion of salary replaced by unemployment benefits in France.

For unemployment rate assumptions, this analysis relied on literature indicating an unemployment rate of 85% among autistic adults in general (36). In the absence of specific data for autistic graduates with NID a 60% rate was assumed based on comparative studies suggesting a moderate improvement in employment outcomes for autistic individuals with higher education (61,62).

To ensure alignment with realistic post-graduation income expectations, the projected annual gross salaries by socio-professional category (SPC) and sector were used in the calculation (see Appendix, Table XX).

2.6.3f Public benefit costs, discounting and final estimation

To express future public benefits in present (2025) values, the discount factor rate was computed for each year. $Discount\ Factor_t = \frac{1}{(1+r)^n}$. Where $r = 0.03$ the discount rate, and n is the number of years between 2025 and the target year. Each annual public benefit (Tax revenue, social contributions, transfer effect, unemployment effect) was multiplied by its respective discount factor and by the number of students in each SPC category:

$$Present\ Value_t = Contribution_t \times Discount\ factor_t \times \# \text{ students by SPC}$$

3 Analysis

3.1 Base case and subgroup analysis

The analysis was conducted under a base-case scenario that assumed a 70% employment rate for graduates with autism without intellectual disability (NID). This rate, while higher than employment rates reported in international studies for autistic graduates (typically 34-58%) (63–65) was chosen as an optimistic benchmark to reflect the potential impact of robust inclusive policies in the French context. For reference, recent INSEE statistics indicate that the employment rate for the general population aged 25–49 in France is 83% (66).

The model was static, assuming that 100% of students completed their Bachelor's degree in three years and their Master's degree in five years, with a graduation rate of 100%.

Employment outcomes were stratified by socio-professional category (Managers, Associate professionals, Clerical support workers, Skilled workers) to reflect heterogeneity in employment placement, income levels, and associated fiscal returns. Each SPC was further disaggregated by employment sectors (public vs private) to capture structural differences in salary progression, contribution schemes, and fiscal effects. This dual stratification allowed for a more nuanced understanding of which employment paths offered the greatest fiscal return on public investment.

Public costs, including direct educational expenditure, scholarship funding, and forgone tax revenue were projected to 2025 using observed or estimated annual growth rates. Public benefits, including increased tax revenue, social security contributions, and reduced reliance on social transfers and unemployment support were discounted at a 3% rate to reflect their present value in 2025.

3.2 Sensitivity analysis

To assess the robustness of the estimates, two one-way sensitivity analyses were conducted:

- **Scenario 1: 58% reduced employment rate**

In the first sensitivity analysis, the employment insertion rate was adjusted to 58% to reflect a more conservative and realistic employment scenario. This adjustment acknowledges the well-documented employment barriers faced by autistic graduates, despite the existence of dedicated recruitment support programs. The 58% was selected based on recent data, including a 2025 article on "Autism Unemployment Rate" (65) and a 2024 scoping review, which reported that

55.1% of autistic individuals without intellectual developmental disorder were unemployed in a German study control group (67). This more conservative employment rate provides important context when compared to the general population employment rate of 83% for people in France, as reported by INSEE in May 2025 (66).

- **Scenario 2: 40% repetition rate**

In the second sensitivity analysis, a 40% repetition rate was applied for autistic students without intellectual disability repeating the first year in both Bachelor and Master programs. This decision was supported by French MESRI data (2023) showing that only 28% of students complete their Bachelor's degree in 3 years, with 40% completing it in 3-4 years (68). Additionally, international literature highlights that autistic students are more likely to experience delays in degree completion due to barriers related to academic, social, and structural challenges (69,70).

4 Results

4.1 Base case results

4.1.1a Study Population

This cost-benefit analysis modeled a total of 864 autistic students without intellectual disability expected to graduate in 2025 from French public universities. Of this population 81% were in the final year of a Bachelor's degree and 19 % in the final year of a Master's program. The academic distribution was as follows: 389 students in Humanities and Social Sciences, 95 students in Law, Economics, and Management, and 380 in Sciences and Health. After graduation, 70% entered the labor market. Those were stratified by the employment sector (public vs private) and socio-professional categories (SPCs): 35% (n=214) Managers, 8% (n=46) Associate Professionals, 48% (n=293) Clerical Support Workers, and 9% (n=52) Skilled Workers. Sectoral projections indicated that 497 graduates (58%) would enter the private sector, while 367 (42%) would join the public sector (Table 1).

Table 1: Population Summary table.

Education	Bachelor	Master	Total	%
Humanities & Social Sciences	315	74	389	45%
Law, Economic & Management	77	18	95	11%
Sciences & Health	308	72	380	44%
Total	700	164	864	100%
Employment	Public	Private	Total	%
Managers (Category A)	91	123	214	35%
Associate Professionals (Category B)	20	27	46	8%
Clerical Support Workers (Category C)	124	169	293	48%
Skilled Workers (Category C)	22	30	52	9%
Total	257	348	605	100%

4.1.1b Sectoral & occupational performance

A closer examination of sectoral outcomes revealed that the private sector accounted for the majority of both public costs (57.7%) and public benefits (57.64%) (total cost by sector /total

benefits all sectors x 100), yielding an NPV of €14 million and an ROI of 18.88%. The public sector, while representing a smaller share, achieved a slightly higher ROI of 19.18% (NPV public/ Total private cost). Across both sectors, all SPCs produced a positive NPV :

- Clerical Support Workers generated the highest total benefits of €70.9 million, with a total cost of €62.3 million and an NPV of €8.6 million.
- Managers generated €58 million in benefits against €45.6 million in costs, yielding an NPV of €12.5 million.
- Skilled Workers generated €12.4 million in benefits against €10.9 million in costs, NPV of €1.5 million.
- Associate Professionals contributed €11.5 million in benefits with €9.8 million in costs, resulting in an NPV of €1.7 million.

4.1.1c Public Benefits structure and drivers

Among the €153 million in total public benefits, social transfers (RSA, AAH, APL) reductions contributed the most at €121.5 million (79.42%). Social contributions totaled €13.6 million (8.94%), while tax contributions accounted for €5.6 million (3.67%). Unemployment savings reached €12.1 million (7.97%).

4.1.1d Overall investment performance

Over the five years following graduation (2026–2030), the total public investment in inclusive higher education for this population was estimated at €128.6 million (Table 3). This investment included direct educational costs, scholarship funding, and foregone tax revenue during the study. In return, the French government realized €153 million in public benefits, primarily from increased tax revenue, social contributions, and reduced reliance on social transfers and unemployment benefits (see Table 2). The resulting net present value (NPV) was €24.5 million, yielding a benefit-cost ratio of 1.19 (CBR = Public benefits /public costs). In practical terms, every €1 invested generated €1.19 in societal benefits within five years, and the return on investment (ROI) reached 19% (ROI = NPV/Public Investment). Notably, the payback period for public funds was just under 5 years (4.2 years) (PP = Public costs / Public benefits for 1 year). The total cost per student is shown in Table 2 (Appendix).

Table 2 - Public costs and benefits of higher education attainment for autistic individuals without intellectual disability

		Direct Educational Cost	Foregone Tax Revenue	Scholarship Funding	Public Costs	Tax Contribution	Social Contributions	Transfer Effect	Unemployment effect	Public Benefits	Net Present Value
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(11)
Private	Managers	16,577,341	5,050,988	4,670,382	26,298,712	2,298,827	3,876,593	24,781,783	3,455,022	34,412,225	8,113,513
	Associate Professionals	3,565,322	1,086,326	1,004,468	5,656,116	227,559	575,611	5,329,867	513,015	6,646,053	989,937
	Clerical Support Workers	22,659,911	6,904,301	6,384,042	35,948,254	716,204	2,898,622	33,874,732	2,583,404	40,072,962	4,124,708
	Skilled Workers	3,986,422	1,214,632	1,123,106	6,324,161	132,565	536,516	5,959,379	478,171	7,106,630	782,469
Public	Managers	12,240,288	3,591,952	3,448,492	19,280,732	1,277,452	2,154,212	18,298,240	1,919,946	23,649,849	4,369,118
	Associate Professionals	2,632,543	772,528	741,674	4,146,745	172,961	437,506	3,935,439	389,928	4,935,834	789,089
	Clerical Support Workers	16,731,503	4,909,913	4,713,815	26,355,231	674,156	2,728,448	25,012,242	2,431,736	30,846,582	4,491,351
	Skilled Workers	2,943,473	863,772	829,273	4,636,518	118,600	480,000	4,400,254	427,801	5,426,655	790,137
Socio professional category	Managers	28,817,629	8,642,940	8,118,874	45,579,444	3,576,278	6,030,804	43,080,023	5,374,969	58,062,074	12,482,631
	Associate Professionals	6,197,864	1,858,854	1,746,142	9,802,861	400,520	1,013,117	9,265,305	902,943	11,581,886	1,779,026
	Clerical Support Workers	39,391,414	11,814,214	11,097,857	62,303,485	1,390,360	5,627,070	58,886,974	5,015,140	70,919,544	8,616,059
	Skilled Workers	6,929,896	2,078,404	1,952,380	10,960,679	251,165	1,016,515	10,359,633	905,972	12,533,285	1,572,606
Employment sector	Private	46,788,996	14,256,247	13,181,999	74,227,243	3,375,154	7,887,342	69,945,761	7,029,612	88,237,869	14,010,627
	Public	34,547,807	10,138,165	9,733,254	54,419,226	2,243,169	5,800,165	51,646,175	5,169,411	64,858,920	10,439,695
Total	Total	81,336,803	24,394,412	22,915,253	128,646,468	5,618,323	13,687,507	121,591,936	12,199,023	153,096,790	24,450,321

4.2 Sensitivity analysis

Scenario 1: 58% reduced employment rate

In this scenario, the employment integration rate of autistic graduates without intellectual disability was reduced from 70% to 58% to reflect more conservative assumptions based on structural labor market barriers and international evidence. The total public investment remained constant at €128.6 million, but the total public benefits decreased to €111.3 million, resulting in a negative net present value (NPV) of – €17.3 million. This scenario yielded a benefit-cost ratio (BCR) of 0.87, indicating that every euro invested generated only €0.87 in return over the five-year post-graduation period. The return on investment (ROI) fell to –13.4%.

A closer look at socio-professional category (SPC) outcomes revealed that only Managers generated a positive NPV (€2.2 million), while all other categories produced negative returns. Clerical Support Workers, the largest group, showed the highest loss in absolute terms (– €2.7 million), followed by Skilled Workers (– €0.4 million) and Associate Professionals (– €0.1 million). (See Appendix Table 4)

Scenario 2: 40% repetition rate

This scenario simulated that 40% of graduate students repeated a year before graduating. The total public cost increased to €129.3 million, while the total benefits remained constant at €153 million, yielding a net present value (NPV) of €23.7 million. The benefit-cost ratio remained favorable with a return on investment (ROI) of 18.39%.

All SPCs maintained a positive NPV, with Managers (€12.2 million) and Clerical Support Workers (€8.2 million) leading the fiscal gains. Skilled Workers and Associate Professionals generated more modest but still positive returns (€1.5 million and €1.7 million, respectively).

Table 3: NPV by Base case and Scenario

Scenario	Public costs (€M)	Public Benefits (€M)	NPV (€M)
Base case (70% employment)	128 646 468	153 096 789	24 450 321
Sensitivity 1 (58% employment)	128 646 468	126 851 625	-1 794 842
Sensitivity 2 (40% repetition)	129 313 909	153 096 789	23 782 880

5 Discussion

5.1 Main findings

This study modeled a cohort of 864 autistic graduates without intellectual disability (NID) entering the French labor market in 2025 after completing tertiary education. Across both public and private sectors and all socio-professional categories (SPCs), the base-case scenario produced a positive net present value (NPV) of €24.5 million, with a benefit-cost ratio of 1.19 and a return on investment (ROI) of 19%. Notably, the largest fiscal gains came not from increased tax revenue but from reduced reliance on social transfers and unemployment benefits, highlighting the substantial financial burden the state bears when autistic individuals are excluded from employment. Even with a 40% repetition rate, the model remained cost-beneficial. However, when the employment rate was reduced to 58% a figure more consistent with international evidence, the NPV turned negative, and the state lost €17.3 million, with only managerial roles yielding positive returns.

5.2 Interpretation

The results of this analysis show that inclusive higher education for autistic individuals is not just a matter of social justice but also an economic one. When autistic graduates are given the support to complete their studies and access employment, the government benefits not just through increased tax contributions, but more significantly through reduced social welfare expenditures. This finding echoes the conclusions of the landmark Care Policy and Evaluation Centre (CPEC) report in the UK, which found that cost savings from employment inclusion for autistic adults can exceed £1 billion annually(71). This also shows that the true economic loss lies in perpetuating dependency rather than enabling autonomy and contribution (72).

The sensitivity analysis also showed that education alone is not enough, with the public investment no longer paying off when employment rates drop. The higher NPVs observed for managers and skilled workers reflect both higher wage structures and the greater likelihood of

integration into stable employment. However, even lower-income roles generated positive returns in the base case, reinforcing the idea that inclusive education and employment create value at every level of society.

5.3 Strengths, Limitations Areas for improvement

Results from this study gave a holistic view of fiscal impacts, social benefits, and the structural costs of exclusion. The use of a cost-benefit framework, stratification by socio-professional category, and scenario analysis reflects methodological rigor and policy relevance. With its focus on short-term fiscal returns, the study ensures timely policy relevance and proactivity from future unforeseen events that could impact policies. However, it may underestimate the full fiscal and social benefits that accrue over a graduate's working life. Future analysis should try to extend the projection window to at least 10 years. By modeling both optimistic and conservative employment scenarios, the study realistically reflects the uncertainties and barriers autistic graduates face in the labor market. However, the reliance on aggregate employment rates and proxies from international or general population data may not fully capture the unique realities of autistic graduates in France. A longitudinal study should be considered for the future. Although aggregating outcomes by socio-professional category (SPC) and employment sector allows for nuanced insights into which pathways generate the highest returns, and where policy interventions might be most effective, it does not distinguish between Bachelor's and Master's graduates in terms of earnings or costs, potentially masking differences in returns by academic achievement. The analysis acknowledges that the benefits of inclusion extend beyond fiscal metrics, referencing literature that links educational and employment success to improved mental health, reduced anxiety and depression, and lower healthcare use. But no health impact was quantified in the current model due to data limitations and lack of time. Future research should integrate public health frameworks and outcome measures to capture the full societal value of inclusion, including non-fiscal benefits. Finally, where direct data were lacking, the study made transparent, evidence-based assumptions, drawing on the best available literature and official statistics. However, Reliance on proxies and assumptions introduces uncertainty and may limit the precision of the findings. As more direct data become available—through national surveys, administrative data linkage, or cohort studies future analyses should update and refine these parameters to enhance accuracy and policy relevance.

5.4 Policy implications & Recommendations.

France's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 4, which calls for "inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all" (73) must be translated into sustained, systemic action not only for individuals with autism, but also for anyone with a disability. The results of this study show that investment in inclusive higher education is both fiscally responsible and socially just, but only if it is paired with robust policies to ensure real workforce integration.

Since graduation is not the finish line but rather participation, inclusive programs like Atypie-Friendly must extend beyond graduation, providing mentorship, job placement, and ongoing support. Besides, France's legal quotas for the employment of people with disabilities must be enforced with transparency and accountability. Annual evaluations, using cost-benefit frameworks, should be institutionalized to track what works and where improvements are needed. The "handicap" label, while legally protective, can perpetuate stigma and limit opportunities. Policies should move toward strength-based language and frameworks, emphasizing ability and potential. Lastly, national campaigns co-designed with autistic individuals are needed to challenge stereotypes and educate employers.

6 CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to evaluate the public return on investment of inclusive higher education for autistic students without intellectual disability in France. Using a five-year post-graduation horizon, the findings revealed that such investments can yield substantial economic returns, particularly through reduced reliance on social transfers and unemployment support. The study also shows that investing is essential for building a fairer, healthier, and more productive society as long as policies ensure continuity from education to employment, enforce and evaluate workplace inclusion, and foster environments where autistic individuals can thrive without stigma.

As France moves forward with its national strategy for neurodevelopmental conditions and continues to invest in programs like Atypie-Friendly, we should remember that inclusion is not charity, it is rather a smart investment with measurable returns.

Appendix

Scenario 1

Table 4: Scenario 1 58% Employment Rate

		Direct Educational cost	Foregone Tax Revenue	Scholarship Funding	Public Costs	Tax contribution	Social Contributions	Effect of transfers	Unemployment Effect	Total Benefits	Net Present Value
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(11)
Private	Mangers	16,577,341	5,050,988	4,670,382	26,298,712	1,904,742	3,212,034	20,533,477	2,862,733	28,512,986	2,214,274
	Associate Professionals	3,565,322	1,086,326	1,004,468	5,656,116	188,549	476,935	4,416,176	425,070	5,506,729	-149,387
	Clerical Skilled Workers	22,659,911	6,904,301	6,384,042	35,948,254	593,426	2,401,716	28,067,635	2,140,535	33,203,311	-2,744,943
	Skilled Workers	3,986,422	1,214,632	1,123,106	6,324,161	109,839	444,542	4,937,771	396,199	5,888,351	-435,810
Public	Mangers	12,240,288	3,591,952	3,448,492	19,280,732	1,058,460	1,784,918	15,161,399	1,590,813	19,595,589	314,858
	Associate Professionals	2,632,543	772,528	741,674	4,146,745	143,311	362,505	3,260,792	323,083	4,089,691	-57,054
	Clerical Skilled Workers	16,731,503	4,909,913	4,713,815	26,355,231	558,587	2,260,714	20,724,429	2,014,867	25,558,597	-796,634
	Skilled Workers	2,943,473	863,772	829,273	4,636,518	98,269	397,714	3,645,925	354,463	4,496,371	-140,147
Socio-Professional Category	Mangers	28,817,629	8,642,940	8,118,874	45,579,444	2,963,202	4,996,952	35,694,876	4,453,545	48,108,576	2,529,132
	Associate Professionals	6,197,864	1,858,854	1,746,142	9,802,861	331,860	839,440	7,676,967	748,153	9,596,420	-206,441
	Clerical Skilled Workers	39,391,414	11,814,214	11,097,857	62,303,485	1,152,012	4,662,430	48,792,065	4,155,401	58,761,908	-3,541,577
	Skilled Workers	6,929,896	2,078,404	1,952,380	10,960,679	208,108	842,256	8,583,696	750,662	10,384,722	-575,957
Employment sector	Private	46,788,996	14,256,247	13,181,999	74,227,243	2,796,556	6,535,226	57,955,059	5,824,536	73,111,378	-1,115,865
	Public	34,547,807	10,138,165	9,733,254	54,419,226	1,858,626	4,805,851	42,792,545	4,283,226	53,740,248	-678,977
Total		81,336,803	24,394,412	22,915,253	128,646,468	4,655,182	11,341,078	100,747,604	10,107,762	126,851,626	-1,794,843

Abstract in French

Contexte: L'autisme touche 1 enfant sur 100 dans le monde. L'enseignement supérieur inclusif reste un défi pour les personnes autistes sans déficience intellectuelle. En France, des initiatives telles que le programme Atypie-Friendly ont été mises en place pour améliorer l'accès, mais leur impact économique n'a pas encore été évalué. Cette étude vise à estimer les retours économiques d'un investissement dans l'enseignement supérieur inclusif pour les personnes autistes sans déficience intellectuelle.

Méthodes: Une analyse coûts-bénéfices fondée sur la littérature a été menée du point de vue de l'État français en tant qu'investisseur publique, sur un horizon de cinq ans après l'obtention du diplôme (2026–2030). Le modèle a estimé les coûts publics (frais de scolarité, pertes fiscales, bourses) et les bénéfices publics (recettes fiscales, cotisations sociales, effet des transferts et du chômage). L'analyse a porté sur 864 étudiants autistes sans déficience intellectuelle, avec une ventilation par secteur d'emploi et catégorie socioprofessionnelle. Une analyse de sensibilité à deux variables a été réalisée pour tester la robustesse du scénario de base.

Résultats: Dans le scénario de base (taux d'emploi de 70 %), l'investissement public total de 128,6 millions d'euros a généré 153 millions d'euros de bénéfices, pour une VAN de 24,4 millions €, et un retour sur investissement de 18,99 %. Le scénario 1 (taux d'emploi de 58 %) a produit une VAN négative de -1,7 millions €, tandis que le scénario 2 (40 % de redoublement) a conduit à une VAN légèrement inférieure de 23,7 millions €.

Conclusion: L'inclusion dans l'enseignement supérieur des étudiants autistes sans déficience intellectuelle constitue un investissement économiquement pertinent. Toutefois, ses bénéfices dépendent d'efforts soutenus pour assurer la réussite académique et l'accès au marché du travail. L'inclusion doit aller au-delà de l'admission universitaire et s'appuyer sur des politiques coordonnées favorisant une pleine participation à la société.

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