

Position Paper

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Understanding Social Protection: From Justification to Intervention (2024-2025-400-SPP4206)

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Thesis: To be fully effective, the most appropriate path to address the problem of student poverty in France must rely on a universal targeting approach—that is, automatic and unconditional coverage of all students—which proves to be superior to schemes based on selective targeting.

Student poverty in France

Student poverty is a recurring topic of concern in France, notably in the media which relay barometers and surveys showing alarming figures of the students' welfare, such as the annual publication by the polling institute IFOP and COP21 (IFOP, 2024), or short reports documenting the queues at student food assistance distributions.

Yet, this situation of precarity is not treated in the same way in the public debate as that affecting other social groups, such as children or the elderly, who generally reach consensus (at least in discourse) on the seriousness of the problem. Student poverty remains, indeed, often perceived in public opinion as a secondary phenomenon, a transitory inevitability, intrinsically linked to student status.

Although partially minimized, its consequences are numerous, visible, and well documented. Student poverty manifests directly or indirectly: notably through monetary poverty, with more than 40% of students living outside the family home below the relative poverty line (Marteau, et al., 2023); through the significant reliance on food aid provided by NGOs, with an estimate of 18% of students who went to food distribution in 2023 (IFOP, 2024); and also through degraded housing conditions (Rey and al., 2023).

However, student poverty is difficult to define and measure. First, it is difficult to establish a clear-cut definition that categorizes which student is poor and which is not, because poverty is relative, and the standards of living necessary for students to reach an acceptable way of living differ slightly from that of a family; from a capabilities approach

(Sen, 1983), students' functionings are specific to this category of the population. For example, if the capability to live in decent and satisfactory housing is universal, it translates for students into the functioning of renting a small studio or having access to a room in a public student residence, but this differs for a senior, for whom the same capability would be expressed by access to larger accommodation. On the other hand, for students, having a remaining disposable income allowing regular outings and social activities with their peers can be considered necessary to have "the freedom to live a valued life."

Finally, the greater and more specific challenge regarding students' poverty is to measure their level of welfare. This difficulty arises from the fact that the standard of living of students not only depends on easily measurable things (as scholarships, or labor incomes), it also depends on transfers much harder to assess (as monetary and especially in-kind support from family) (Giret and Tenret, 2020; Castell and Grobon, 2020). For example: How can the standard of living of a student who alternates between living on his own during the academic time and residing with his parents during holidays be reliably assessed?.

Despite the difficulties of measurement, student poverty has long been identified by public authorities as a specific issue. In France, it has worsened with the massification of higher education (Rossignol-Brunet et al., 2022) that began after the Second World War. While in 1946, only 1–2% of an age group accessed higher education, they were 30% in 1990, and 60% in 2020. This progressive opening of universities to people from middle and working classes favored the emergence of a student mass characterized by poverty and increased social needs.

Since 1955, the Regional Centres for University and School Services (CROUS) has been at the core of the French state's intervention dedicated to student social policy. The CROUS is tasked with ensuring living and support conditions that foster academic success. It operates across multiple areas: social assistance, housing, catering, and culture.

At the core of this student social assistance policy are means-tested grants, allocated according to the CROUS scale ranging from "0 bis" to "7"¹. These grants are calculated based on the parents' taxable income, adjusted for family composition and the distance between the family home and the place of study. Around 37.5% of students in France receive such scholarships. Grant recipients also benefit from priority access to university

¹ It ranges from "0 bis" (lowest level of need) to "7" (highest level of need), based on parental income, number of siblings, and distance from the family home. Higher levels correspond to greater financial support.

housing managed by CROUS, with subsidized rents, and are eligible for reduced-price meals in CROUS cafeterias: 1€ for scholarship holders, and 3,30€ for non-recipients.

In addition to this targeted policy, other complementary or indirect measures also support students, such as housing allowances (APL) available to all students², and employment incentives for student jobs, including tax advantages for companies hiring interns or apprentices.

The French student support system is therefore targeted: it relies on a means test of family income, and eligibility and benefit transfers for assistance depends on the student's position on the CROUS scale.

However, this support system has proven insufficient in addressing student poverty, and thus to create an adequate social safety net for students. This gap is the result of the general structure of the French social protection system, which is largely based on stable employment—specifically full-time, long-term contracts (CDI)—and on family support, with the assumption that young adults remain financially protected by their families even after reaching adulthood.

Given the scale of the issue, many associations, student unions, and political parties (mostly from the left) are calling for substantial reforms.

There are differing perspectives on the reforms needed. Some argue that the issue lies in the inadequacy of the aid provided, pointing out that the maximum scholarship (600€ per month) is provided only to students from families with no taxable income, and remains insufficient to meet basic needs. Others advocate for a shift towards the Danish model, which provides a quasi-universal support to all students (Eurydice, 2025). The most prominent proposal in this direction came from the political party La France Insoumise, who have proposed in 2022 to grant to all students a monthly income equivalent to the poverty threshold, unconditionally (Mélenchon, 2022).

The debate around how to effectively reduce (if not entirely eliminate) student poverty centers on the choice between a targeting approach and a universal one. In this context, targeting is defined as: “a process of defining [the student] who is eligible to receive social [student] benefits and the [student] who is not, by setting eligibility criteria; identifying, verifying and registering eligible beneficiaries” (Stephen Devereux, 2021). In contrast, a categorical-universal approach involves providing support to all individuals within a specific category (in this case, students). While the term “universal” for this type of social program could be debated, it is nevertheless the most used in the public discourse to describe such policies for student.

² APL: *Aide Personnalisée pour le Logement* [Personalized Housing Assistance], provided by the Caisses d'Allocations Familiales (« Branch Family » of the French Social Security).

The targeting method: a more suited approach?

The universalist approach to student aid has many critics, numerous arguments seem to stand in favor of targeting the most vulnerable students, mostly for cost-efficiency, but also for more fairness.

Cost-effectiveness

The main argument put forward by opponents of a universal student allowance is its lack of cost-effectiveness. Providing such a benefit would mean allocating public funds to a lot of students who do not need support or only partially need it, as they already receive financial assistance from their families, student loans, or income from participation in the labor market. The State's priority, according to this view, should be to concentrate its resources on effective targeting, providing adequate support to those truly in need.

Maximizing cost-efficiency, particularly in terms of reducing monetary poverty could be achieved if the State focuses its resources on closing the monetary gap between students' current resources and the poverty threshold. In the case of social assistance through cash transfers (as is the case with student benefit), targeting appears to be the most appropriate response due to its lower economic costs (in terms of transfer costs), and its higher effectiveness (minimizing inclusion errors), especially under budgetary constraints (Devereux, 2021).

In this view, the high-income country with important resources should not use universal social assistance to reduce the problem of monetary poverty that affects only a minority of the student population. Universal social protection is often considered more justified in low- and middle-income countries, where administrative capacity is limited, targeting is hindered by a lack of reliable data and high levels of informality (potentially leading to massive inclusion/exclusion errors), and where poverty and deprivation affect broad segments of the population (Mkandawire, 2005).

Lack of progressivity

Implementing a universal student allowance contradicts the principle of an equitable and progressive safety net (one that is pro-poor), as stated by Margaret Grosh and al. (2008): "The safety net should treat beneficiaries in a fair and equitable way [...] and may provide more generous benefits to the poorest beneficiaries (vertical equity)". However, a flat and universal benefit for students is inherently regressive, considering that the likelihood of pursuing higher education is negatively correlated with household income (Bonneau & Grobon, 2024). In other words, students from wealthier families are more likely to pursue

long studies, meaning that such a program could result in a redistribution favoring the top income deciles.

Behavioral Responses and Moral Hazard

Finally, one of the recurring criticisms concerns potential behavioral responses from students. A universal, highly generous, unconditional cash transfer might reduce incentives for part-time employment among students, decreasing labor supply in the economy and potentially resulting in what some perceive as a form of "de-responsibilization" or loss of autonomy for students.

Additionally, critics argue that providing support without conditions might result in misuse of benefits, such as increased consumption of non-essential or even harmful goods (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, recreational drugs). These concerns, often rooted in stereotypes about student lifestyles, suggest that unconditionality could create negative externalities and dilute the intended social impact of the policy.

There is also the possibility that individuals might attempt to qualify for student aid by enrolling in university—without the intention of studying—simply to receive the benefit, rather than entering the labor market.

III. Limits of Targeting in Practice

In theory, if well-done, targeting the most deprived is considered the most cost-effective method for allocating public resources and addressing student poverty. However, this claim is based on two particularly difficult assumptions. First, that it is possible to design a targeting method capable of clearly distinguishing between students who truly need support and those who do not. Secondly, that such a method can be implemented without generating or carrying with it significant social and political obstacles. In the case of student precarity in France, both assumptions are far from being fulfilled.

Challenge in targeting poor students

First of all, identifying students who are genuinely in need is a difficult task, even in a country with relatively competent administration and abundant data (especially tax data). The current system, based on parental taxable income, struggles to reflect the actual living conditions of students. Even a more sophisticated method that includes assets, grandparents' income, or other indirect indicators cannot accurately capture a student's real standard of living. Legally, parents are required to support their adult children, but this obligation does not always translate into adequate intra-family solidarity. A quarter of

students don't receive any financial support from their parents (OVE, 2023). And while most students do receive some help, the assumption that household resources are fairly distributed among all members only holds, at best, when they live under the same roof. For students who live far from their families or have strained or nonexistent family relationships, this assumption becomes unrealistic.

This disconnect between a student's actual standard of living and their eligibility as determined by means-testing based on parental income is evidenced by the high number of non-scholarship students relying on food aid. Food assistance, usually provided in the form of grocery parcels distributed by NGOs such as Secours populaire français, Restos du Cœur, or FAGE's solidarity grocery stores, is a strong indicator of precarity due to its self-targeting nature. Many non-scholarship students receiving such aid come from families that are not poor by monetary standards, for example these "non-scholarship students" represent 60% of FAGE beneficiaries (FAGE, 2025), revealing a problem of broken intra-family solidarity. Indeed, the explanation that the income threshold used in parental tax data is too low to distinguish between students whose parents are unable to support them financially and those whose parents can, is not convincing. In fact, even students from households with a standard of living slightly below the national median can qualify for scholarship status³. Moreover, the idea that students who are not truly in need would still resort to food aid appears highly implausible, due to the self-targeting nature of such assistance (Grosh and al, 2022) : long waiting lines, the stigma associated with requesting help, and the low perceived quality of the food provided (typically provided by the European Union to the NGOs through the European Fund for Aid to the Most Deprived).

Policy for the poor: poor policy?

Secondly, social policies limited to vulnerable minorities tend to be less ambitious, less generous, and less politically supported "Benefits meant exclusively for the poor often end up being poor benefits" (Sen, 1995). Some evidence suggests the existence of the "tradeoff between the degree of lowincome targeting and the size of redistributive budgets" in developed countries (Korpi & Palme, 1998), the more the policy is targeting the poor (thus the more vulnerable) and the less the level of benefit is adequate to address poverty. This tradeoff led to a paradox situation in which the more the policy is pro-poor

³ For example, a student from Lyon pursuing studies in Paris, with a sibling also in higher education (resulting in six CROUS dependency points), is eligible for a scholarship if their parents' taxable income does not exceed €58,400 per year. This corresponds to a standard of living of €1,900 per month per consumption unit—just below the French national median.

and progressive and the less effective this policy is at tackling the needs of vulnerable people.

This is largely because they benefit from a small, often politically inactive segment of the electorate. Young people from working-class neighborhoods (the potential beneficiaries of targeted social assistance) also tend to vote less. Targeted policies struggle to emerge or persist because they lack broad electoral appeal and fail to generate political consensus—before or after elections. Targeting only the poor, and thus mainly the bottom 20% in France could hinders a cross-class coalition support (mostly between the popular and middle class) that is needed to implement and defend a strong welfare state policies in which “The poor need not stand alone” (Korpi, 1980).

Moreover, these policies only benefitting the most deprived are also among the most symbolically attacked, despite their modest cost. In the United States, programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) are regularly called into question by conservative with non-evidence-based argument that they are discouraging poor people to work (The Heritage Foundation, 2023). In France, means-tested student grants (€2.25 billion, less than 0.1% of GDP) or the RSA (Revenu de Solidarité Active) are frequent targets, notably by conservative and ultra-liberal lobbies like IFRAP, and are often reduced to clichés about “wasteful spending” from beneficiaries: flat screens, cannabis, vacations... Yet these criticisms overlook the very low amounts involved. By contrast, universal or quasi-universal policies like housing benefits (APL, €8.4 billion) or family allowances (€50 billion), though far more expensive, are less attacked and thus more politically viable.

Thus, while equity suggests that social policy should prioritize the poorest and be progressive, there is an unavoidable trade-off between equity (pro-poor and progressive) on the one hand, and adequacy and political sustainability on the other—two equally essential principles of a social safety net (Grosh and al., 2008). In short, we must choose between a targeted policy that supports only the poorest students but is inadequate and politically vulnerable, and a (degressive) universal benefit that is both adequate for those in need and politically sustainable.

Revisiting the Cost Argument

The cost argument must be put into perspective. A universal student income could amount to up to €41 billion (2.9 million students multiplied by the annual poverty line), or around 1.8% of France’s GDP. This is a significant figure, but social protection policy is shaped not only by budgetary constraints, but also by political choices and prevailing social norms. Moreover, the risk of budgetary slippage for such a policy is low. The total cost, expressed as a percentage of GDP, is expected to decline over time for two main

reasons: first, the number of students is projected to decrease due to demographic trends; second, the indexation of benefits to inflation means that, even with a constant student population, the program's weight in the GDP will shrink as the economy grows.

Additional savings could also be achieved, as targeting social assistance entails marginal costs compared to universal support. These costs are borne directly by the implementing institutions (through the inherent and specific administrative costs of means-testing), but also indirectly by individuals, through social or psycho-social burdens (Devereux et al., 2017). Finally, a universal student benefit could generate further savings by phasing out indirect or less efficient forms of support, such as tax deductions for children in higher education, which currently allow households to deduct up to €6,000 per child from their taxable income.

Reconsidering Behavioral Effects

Lastly, the feared behavioral effects are often misunderstood. A reduction in students' labor supply might, in fact, have positive effects on their human capital development. The design of university programs and the European ECTS system assumes that a student devotes 25–30 hours per credit, amounting to about 1,500 hours per academic year to validate 60 ECTS credits. Taking into account 10 weeks of holidays, this corresponds to about 34 hours of study per week. Any side job exceeding 10 hours per week may therefore negatively affect mental health, academic success, and skill acquisition.

A universal income would allow students to leave precarious jobs (in delivery services, catering, etc.) often taken out of financial necessity, and instead focus more time on their studies. This would improve long-term human capital. The argument of “disengagement” often conceals the reality that these small jobs themselves are barriers to academic success. Research on student labor shows that such precarious and compulsory work significantly hinders educational outcomes, being associated with lower exam performance and longer time to degree completion (Béduwé et al., 2019).

Conclusion:

To effectively tackle student poverty in France, a universal and unconditional approach appears both more adequate and more sustainable than selective targeting. While targeted support may seem more cost-efficient in theory, in practice it fails to capture the full extent of students' needs, due to flawed assumptions about family solidarity and opaque living standards. Universal coverage, on the other hand, guarantees a baseline of dignity and academic focus for all students, reducing inequalities in access to higher education. It also proves more politically resilient, as broader coverage fosters broader

support. Fears of high cost or behavioral distortions are often exaggerated and overlook the long-term gains in human capital and administrative simplification. Ultimately, equity, adequacy, and political feasibility point toward the same direction: implementing a universal student income is not only possible, but necessary for a fair and effective student welfare system.

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