

# **Changes in the Spanish university (1975-2025): expansion, reorganization and financing**

## **Los cambios en la universidad española (1975-2025): expansión, reorganización y financiación**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes the changes that have taken place in Spanish universities over the fifty years since the transition to democracy began in 1975. It focuses on the expansion of university education, the organization of academic degrees, and the financing of universities, including scholarships and study grants for university students. The approach used is the analysis of the main statistical indicators and legal texts approved in relation to these issues. All of this is accompanied by secondary sources that allow for a reconstruction of the evolution of the university and its changes. The article notes that, during the democratic period, the university expanded, the academic degrees were reorganized, and funding increased, including scholarships and study grants. The balance of democracy is clearly positive. However, some areas for improvement are discussed, based on international comparisons and a more detailed analysis of each dimension. Some challenges to be addressed in the future are identified and some university policy proposals are suggested to address them.

*Key words:* University, Spain, Democracy, University policy, Higher Education, University spending, University degrees.

## Resumen

Este artículo describe los cambios acontecidos en la universidad española durante los cincuenta años desde la transición democrática que comienza en 1975. Se centra en las dimensiones relativas a la extensión de la educación universitaria, la organización de las enseñanzas en este nivel y la financiación de las universidades, incluidas las becas y ayudas al estudio para los estudiantes universitarios. El enfoque utilizado es el análisis de los principales indicadores estadísticos y de los textos legales aprobados en relación con estas cuestiones. Todo ello es acompañado de fuentes secundarias que permiten hacer una reconstrucción de la evolución de la universidad y sus cambios. Se constata en el artículo que, en el periodo democrático, la universidad se expande, se reorganizan sus enseñanzas y aumenta la financiación universitaria, también en lo que concierne a las becas y ayudas al estudio. El balance de la democracia es claramente positivo. Sin embargo, se discuten algunos elementos de mejora derivados de la comparación internacional y del análisis más detallado de cada dimensión. Se detectan algunos retos que abordar en el futuro y se sugieren algunas propuestas de política universitaria para atenderlos.

*Palabras clave:* Universidad, España, Democracia, Política universitaria, Educación Superior, Gasto universitario, Enseñanzas universitarias.

## Introduction

The change that the Spanish university has undergone over the last fifty years has been very intense. From the early 1970s to the present day, there has been a shift from a traditional, centralised university model, which prevailed under Franco's dictatorship, to a more modern, decentralised university model, which has been progressively developed since the end of Franco's regime and during the period of democracy. Franco's university legislation dates to 1943, when the University Organisation Act (LOU) was enacted. The state had strong control over the universities, although the professors constituted a body with considerable autonomy and influence on university policy. The university institutions developed a broad training function, although their research work was more limited. From the 1960s onwards, the university began to expand, as it did in other neighbouring countries.

In 1970, in the final phase of the dictatorship, the General Education

Act (LGE) was passed, which represented an important step towards the modernisation of the education system, including the university, although the budget allocation for its implementation was lower than expected. In the democratic period, the University Reform Law (LRU), enacted in 1983, laid the foundations for the new, more modern and decentralised university model, in which the Autonomous Communities (ACs) were given most of the powers in university affairs. With this law the universities were given autonomy, and, among other things, an attempt was made to make university education more accessible to all through a major expansion of places and grants for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Scientific research by the universities was also promoted (Sánchez Ferrer, 1996).

From the early 1980s to the present day, there has been a succession of university laws that have brought about minor changes, although each one has incorporated some defining element of what constitutes the present university system. The Organic Law on Universities (LOU) of 2001 created the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) with the aim of controlling the quality of universities, centres and degrees, as well as acting as a filter for the recruitment of teaching staff. The Organic Law for the Modification of the Organic Law on Universities (LOMLOU) of 2007 adapted Spanish university studies to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which arose from the Bologna Declaration of 1999 to unify European higher education; degrees were shortened in the so-called bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees were created. Finally, the Organic Law of the University System (LOSU) of 2023 defined the different categories of university teaching staff that exist today.

Although these laws have created the legal framework within which university policy has operated, the Royal Decrees that have often developed the laws, as well as the budget allocation they have received to develop their regulatory content, must be also considered. It is important to take into account the behaviour of both the ACs, which have most of the powers in university affairs, and the universities themselves, which in the exercise of their university autonomy make many decisions that define university policy (Ball, 2015).

The analysis of the changes that have taken place at university level

is complex, as there are many dimensions involved, such as student access to university, the financing of this level of education, university governance, the selection of teaching staff and university research, to cite just a few examples. For reasons of space, this article focuses on some of these dimensions, without, of course, neglecting the importance of the others<sup>1</sup>. In particular, the dimensions that will be addressed are those relating to the expansion of university education, the organisation of university education, as well as the funding for university studies and in grants and study aids. These are the dimensions that most directly affect students (and their families), their access to, progression through and graduation from university.

The aim of the article is, therefore, to analyse the changes that have taken place in the university in the 50-year democratic period between the death of the dictator Franco in 1975 and 2025. Despite the eminently descriptive nature of the text, conceptual and analytical frameworks from both national and international academic literature are used (e.g. Ball, 2015; Ball and Youdell, 2008; Verger, 2016; Verger and Curran, 2014). The situation since around 1960s is shown to give an idea of the starting situation, and of what the context was like in Spain prior to the establishment of democracy. The approach used is, on the one hand, the analysis of different statistical indicators related to these dimensions, and, on the other, of the legal texts approved in relation to these issues. Furthermore, the abundance of secondary sources, which have dealt with shorter periods than the one analysed here, allows us to reconstruct the evolution of the university in democracy and some of its changes.

After this introduction, the following sections refer to each of the selected dimensions. Finally, an assessment of the changes that took place during democracy is presented, the light and shadows of the period are discussed, and some proposals for university policy for the future are presented.

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<sup>1</sup> It has not been possible to deal with the research dimension of universities, as this would require a specific article. Their importance has been growing since the second half of the 1980s and can now be compared with that of neighbouring countries.

## The expansion of university education

Higher education began to expand from the 1960s onwards. In 1960 there were 81,142 students in the faculties and engineering schools in Spain, giving a gross enrolment rate in higher education of 3.6% of the population aged 20 to 24. In 1970 the number of students at this level increased to 192,139, and the enrolment rate in higher education out of the population of this age group to 7.54%. By 1975, higher education students had risen to 324,036, with an enrolment rate of 12.66% of the population aged 20-24 (Núñez, 2005).

In the democratic period, the number of university students has continued to increase, reaching a figure of 1,762,459 in the academic year 2023-2024, distributed among undergraduate (more than 78%), master's (more than 16%) and doctoral studies. This represents a net enrolment rate of 30.4% of the population aged 18 to 24 in bachelor's or master's studies (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024). Therefore, with the caution imposed by the fact that these are not identical indicators due to changes in the education system over time, in the democratic period (taken since 1975) the number of university students has increased fivefold, and the university enrolment rate has doubled.

From a comparative point of view, Spain has a percentage of the population aged 25-34 with higher education (which includes not only university studies but also higher vocational training) slightly above the average for OECD and EU25 countries; this percentage reaches 50.5% in Spain in 2022, compared to 47.2% for the OECD average and 44.7% for the EU25. However, if instead of a flow indicator, that considers the young population, we use a *stock* indicator, that takes into account the adult population, Spain is at the EU average. Spain has a percentage of working-age adults aged 25 to 64 with higher education of around 40% in 2021, similar to the average of these countries (CRUE, 2024). The explanation for this apparent paradox lies in the fact that Spain started out with a low *stock* of human capital, which is gradually being compensated for by the higher educational level of younger people, until we are at a level like the countries around us.

An important key element to explaining the increase in the number of university students is the gender dimension; in the 1960s and 1970s, men

still went to university to a much greater extent than women. In 1960, the gross enrolment rate of the population aged 20-24 in faculties was 2.84% for the student body as a whole and 4.39% for males. In 1970 these rates were 5.89% and 7.98% respectively (Núñez, 2005). It should be borne in mind that the differences must have been greater since engineering students were overwhelmingly male. Today, after fifty years of democracy, the proportion of men and women has reversed, with more women than men studying at university. In the academic year 2023-2024, women will account for 56.5% of all university students (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024). In other words, a large part of the growth of the university is due to the incorporation of women at this educational level.

The number of universities in Spain has also grown significantly over this period. Given the increase in the number of university students in the 1960s, it became necessary to create new universities from the end of that decade to meet this growing demand. In 1968 there were 12 universities in Spain, by 1970 three more were created, bringing the total to 15, and by 1975 there were 23 throughout the country (Sánchez Ferrer, 1996). During the period of democracy, the number of universities has grown spectacularly, reaching 91 in the academic year 2023-2024 (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024). In other words, the number of universities has multiplied almost fourfold in this period.

To analyse the increase in the number of universities, it is necessary to consider several dimensions that account for the change in university provision over this period. On the one hand, there is the territorial perspective (Verger and Curran, 2014), the distribution of universities in the territory, in the different ACs. Before democracy, before 1975, the universities were in large and important cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Bilbao. In fact, of what later became the 17 ACs, three of them had no university (Balearic Islands, La Rioja and Castilla la Mancha). At present, all the ACs and most of the provinces have at least one university. Despite the obvious differences between the ACs, all of them have a percentage of young people going to university. In the 2023-2024 academic year, the Autonomous Community of Madrid has the highest net enrolment rate in university education (out of the population aged 18 to 24), 44.1%, compared with the Balearic Islands, where

the rate is 10.3% (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024). With the introduction of the State of Autonomies in democracy, and due to the assumption of powers over universities by the ACs, each region gradually acquired at least one university and, in many cases, several.

Another interesting dimension for understanding the increase in the number of universities is their ownership, whether public or private (Ball and Youdell, 2008; Verger, 2016). In 1975, of the 23 universities in Spain, only four were private (the University of Deusto, the Pontifical University of Comillas, the Pontifical University of Salamanca and the University of Navarra). In other words, just over 17% of universities were private, while the majority were public. However, in the academic year 2023-2024, 41 of the 91 universities in Spain are private, which represents 45% of the total (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024). In democracy we can distinguish two periods. The first period, up to the mid-1990s, saw the creation of all the public universities up to the current 50; the last one to be created, in 1998, was the Polytechnic University of Cartagena. In other words, from 1975 to 1998, 27 public universities were created. And a second period, from the mid-1990s to the present day, in which no public universities were created, and almost all the existing private universities were created, up to 41 in the 2023-2024 academic year. The creation of new private universities was not possible until 1991, when a decree was passed establishing the conditions for the creation and recognition of universities and university centres, which developed Article 58 of the LRU of 1983 (Fernández Mellizo-Soto, 2003). From 1993, when the San Pablo CEU University was created, until the academic year 2023-24, no less than 37 private universities have been created. However, it is important to bear in mind that there are considerable disparities between the different ACs. In most regions, public universities outnumber private universities, except in the case of Castilla y León, the Canary Islands, the Basque Country and the Community of Madrid. In the latter, there are 13 private universities compared to six public ones (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024). Since 2021, several decrees have been passed to regulate the creation and activity of private universities and university centres. As private universities have grown, in some cases obtaining the approval of regional governments after non-binding negative



reports from the central administration, the national government has tightened the requirements for their establishment and operation.

In terms of the share of private university students in the total number of students, the increase has also been noticeable. The percentage of university students in private universities was 3% of the total number of students in 1970 and remained around this percentage until the mid-1990s (Fernández Mellizo-Soto, 2003). From then on, the percentage of students in private universities started to increase to 25.7% of the total number in the 2023-2024 academic year (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024).

Compared to other countries, Spain has a higher percentage of public university graduates than the EU25 and OECD average for undergraduate and, above all, PhD graduates in 2022. However, with regard to the master's level, the percentage of graduates in public universities with respect to the total number of graduates in 2022 is considerably lower than in these groups of countries; while in the EU25 this percentage of graduates in public universities amounts to 78% and in the OECD to 65%, in Spain it represents 52% of the total number of graduates (OECD, 2024). In fact, the expansion of private universities in Spain has been largely due to the master's level. In the academic year 2023-2024 there are more students in private masters than in public ones; 145,306 versus 143,649 students respectively (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024).

Finally, the third dimension for understanding the expansion of the university is the irruption of distance learning universities. The UNED, a publicly owned distance learning university, was created in 1972 and was the first university that did not require students to be physically present. With the rise of private universities from the mid-1990s onwards, the rest of the distance learning universities were created, all of which are private<sup>2</sup>. In the academic year 2023-2024 there are a total of seven non-face-to-face universities, of which six are privately owned, as no additional public universities have been created. In fact, the number of students in private universities in this modality exceeds those in public universities, the former amounting to 187,066 and the latter to 137,726 students; thus, the percentage of students in private

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<sup>2</sup> The Open University of Catalonia (UOC) is privately owned but was promoted by the Catalan government and is managed by a non-profit foundation.



universities is 57.6% of the total number of students in distance learning universities. The preponderance of non-face-to-face private universities over public universities is particularly noticeable at master's level; while 90,712 students study in distance learning private institutions, only 12,088 students do so in public institutions of the same type (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024).

## **The reorganisation of university studies**

The university in the 1960s offered rather long degree courses (called *licenciaturas*), lasting five or six years, with lectures as the predominant teaching method and the final exam as the unique form of evaluation. Curricula were approved by the ministry, although, as far as subject programmes were concerned, professors had a considerable say in defining them. The LGE of 1970 reorganised the university system by incorporating technical education, such as higher technical schools and some intermediate vocational schools, into university studies in the so-called *escuelas universitarias*. University studies began to be divided into three cycles: the first cycle included the first three years of the degree courses and the studies at the *escuelas universitarias*, which gave access to the diploma. The second cycle comprised the rest of the years, two or three, until the degree was completed, and the third cycle was used to study for a doctorate (Sánchez Ferrer, 2016).

In the democratic period, the LRU of 1983 gave universities more room for manoeuvre in the configuration of the curricula of existing degrees and the creation of new degrees. It facilitated the shortening of degree courses to four, or in exceptional cases, five years, and the adoption of a system of credits and semesters, as opposed to the traditional system of hours and annual courses. Several degrees were allowed to be taught in the same faculty or school, which facilitated the creation of new degrees. In addition, a distinction was made between official degrees backed by the government and valid throughout Spain, which had been offered up to that point, and the

universities' own degrees, which could be offered from that moment onwards and which were only backed by the universities themselves. In the analysis carried out by Sánchez Ferrer (2016) on the impact of the LRU on the reform of degree programmes, it is shown that this law made it easier for universities to create new degrees.

However, the most substantive change that took place during democracy in terms of the organisation of university studies was the LOMLOU of 2007. Inspired by the Bologna Declaration of 1999, which aimed to unify European higher education, this reform reorganised Spanish university studies to make them compatible with the EHEA. Both bachelor's degrees and diplomas became four (in some exceptional cases five) years long and began to be called university bachelor's degrees, constituting general university qualifications. University master's degrees, lasting one year in most cases, were consolidated, providing a more specialised university qualification. From the point of view of content, the practical load of subjects was increased and assessment based on more elements than just the final exam was encouraged.

Following this restructuring of university studies, a process of diversification of studies at this level of education began. First, the number of bachelor's and, above all, master's degrees increased. In the academic year 2007-2008, before its implementation began in the academic year 2008-2009, the number of first and second cycle university degrees was 2,669. In the academic year 2010-2011, after the adaptation to the EHEA, the number of bachelor's degrees was 2,338 and the number of master's degrees was 2,429 (Ministry of Education, 2010). In the academic year 2023-24, the total number of bachelor's degrees offered was 3,322 and master's degrees 4,049 (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024). The increase in the number of degrees has been spectacular in this period. Likewise, the range of degrees on offer has diversified intensively. There are more inter-university bachelor's and master's degrees, even with universities in other countries. Many double degrees and some triple degrees have been created, contributing to the diversification and stratification of the university offer. Some bachelor's and master's degrees are taught in languages other than Spanish, especially in English, or there are bilingual degrees, especially at bachelor's level, which are taught in two languages, normally Spanish and English. For example,

in the academic year 2023-2024 there are 38 bachelor's degrees and 434 interuniversity master's degrees in Spain (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, 2024).

As for student access to universities, since 1953 students had to pass a Maturity Test at the end of the Pre-university Course (Muñoz Vitoria, 1995). In 1970, with the approval of the LGE, the Maturity Test was removed, and it was established that the only limit to university access should be the capacity of the centres. This meant that for some years all students who completed the COU (University Orientation Course) could enter university. In 1974, however, the university entrance exam was re-established and called Selectivity, which, together with the secondary school academic record, allowed admission to university studies. The purpose of this test was to assess students' ability, not to select a certain number of students from a pre-determined number. If there were more students than places offered in a degree course, both the Selectivity mark and the mark obtained in the secondary education courses would be considered, with a similar weighting. Only in the case of Medicine, from 1977 onwards, was it possible to limit access through a system known as *numerus clausus* (Fernández Mellizo-Soto, 2003).

At the beginning of democracy and after the LRU of 1983, this system of access to university was maintained, adapting to the changes in the educational system and undergoing some modifications. After several changes in its name, it is now called University Entrance Exam (PAU). Since 2000, the baccalaureate mark has been more important than the university entrance exam mark, 60% for the former compared to 40% for the latter. And since 2014 there has been a voluntary phase that can give the student four additional points, so that the mark is out of 14 instead of 10 points. Originally this system was devised to ensure that students who wanted to enter university have an adequate level. Currently, a small percentage of those who take the test fail it; less than 10% fail. However, this system fulfils the function, not entirely foreseen at the time, of distributing students among different degrees and universities. Students with the best grades have priority in the choice of degrees and universities, which has meant that, in those degrees and universities with an excess of demand, the required entrance grades have risen. This has led to a situation in which some degrees at public universities have

very high cut-off marks for entry, above 12 or 13 points out of 14 (Sacristán, 2023; Cobreros, Gortázar and Moreno, 2023). However, other degrees and universities have lower scores. It should be mentioned here that this system applies to public universities, since private universities establish their own system of access, although students must pass the baccalaureate and the PAU.

An interesting issue is also the extent to which the university offers “second chances” of access, i.e. it allows students who have dropped out of education or have opted for a certain vocational studies to enter university. The first law to address this issue was the LGE of 1970, which gave those over 25 years of age the possibility of accessing university without having completed secondary education (*bachillerato*) and after passing a specific test. In addition, the National University of Distance Education (UNED) was created in 1972 with the aim of enabling students who could not attend classes, many of whom were working, to obtain a university degree. However, at this time, adult education programmes were not very well developed (Fernández Mellizo-Soto, 2003).

In democracy, these opportunities for alternative access to university began to be developed and consolidated. The General Organic Law of the Education System (LOGSE) of 1990 developed adult education, including access to university without a previous degree after passing a specific test. In addition, it ensured that graduates in Advanced Vocational Training (FPGS) could access certain related university studies (Fernández Mellizo-Soto, 2003). Since then, the access routes to university have been widened. It has been made easier for certain groups without a university entrance qualification to enter after passing certain tests. There are specific tests for those over 25 and 45 years of age. There are also tests for the over-40s with work experience in some field for access to specific degrees. These groups also have a small percentage of university places reserved for them, as do high-performance athletes and people with disabilities. Graduates in FPGS can access university with the average mark of their studies (over 10 points) and take the voluntary phase of the PAU to raise their mark up to 14 points.

## **The increase in university funding**

Despite the difficulty of comparing education spending figures from the 1970s with those of today, due not only to changes in the economy and the education system, but also to the lack of data disaggregated by educational level in the older series and the heterogeneity of indicators available in the early years, we can get an idea of the evolution of education spending in Spain during this period (Ball, 2015). Data from Sánchez Ferrer (1996) reveal that public funding per student was stagnant in the first half of the 1970s but increased in the second half of the 1970s and early 1980s; the increase occurred especially after 1977 with the Moncloa Pacts, which gave a strong economic boost to the education system in general (Fernández-Mellizo, 2003). In 1985, total expenditure (public and private) on higher education accounted for 0.6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), so public expenditure would be slightly lower. It should be borne in mind that at that time in Spain higher education only consisted of the university, so this figure must be considered as expenditure on university education. Also, the total annual expenditure per student (in dollars adjusted to Purchasing Power Parity or PPP) in public and private higher education institutions - or in other words, university education - in 1985 amounted to 2,131 dollars (Bricall, 2000)<sup>3</sup>. Over the course of democracy, expenditure on tertiary education has reached 1.4 per cent of GDP in 2021, and annual expenditure per student in university education in 2020 reaches PPP-\$16,751 (INEE, 2024).<sup>4</sup>

The complexity and detail of education expenditure indicators is great. If only public expenditure is considered and if expenditure such as research is excluded, the percentage of public expenditure on university education in 2022 reaches 0.86% (CCOO, 2025). Total annual expenditure per university student in 2020 also drops to 9,404 EUR-PPP if expenditure such as research is excluded (INEE, 2023). Nevertheless, disregarding these methodological issues and considering the entire democratic period, the evolution of the indicators of expenditure on university education is clearly upward. We are

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3 The data used in this report are from the OECD.

4 The data used are also from the OECD in order to make them comparable with those of the 1980s. It should be noted that these expenditure data include, among other things, research expenditure as university expenditure.

not, however, going to dwell on the evolution throughout the period, in which the crisis of the late 2000s clearly had a negative effect on all education spending, including university education.

In comparative terms we can say that Spain has, in 2021, a total expenditure on tertiary education as a percentage of GDP like the OECD and the EU25; Spain's percentage (1.4%) is slightly below the OECD average (1.5%) and slightly above the 1.3% of the EU25 (INEE, 2024). Using the indicator of public expenditure on higher education institutions (which excludes research) as a percentage of GDP, Spain is slightly below the average of neighbouring countries in 2021; this percentage is 0.96% in Spain and 0.99% in the OECD or EU25 average (CyD, 2024). However, if we consider the annual expenditure per university student in 2020, Spain is clearly below both the OECD and EU averages; while in Spain it is PPP-\$16,751, the OECD average is PPP-\$22,096 and the EU average is PPP-\$21,307 (INEE, 2024). If we consider expenditure figures that do not include research and for higher education (not just university education), in 2019 the annual expenditure per student at the higher level of education was 9,796 EUR-PPP in Spain and 10,775 EUR-PPP in the EU27 average (INEE, 2023). So, despite the complexities of comparison, it seems that Spain lags in terms of public expenditure on university education, especially in terms of funding per student.

As mentioned above, university policy in Spain is decentralised and public spending on universities depends mainly on the ACs (Verger and Curran, 2014). The national figures hide important regional differences. Looking at regional public spending on university policy as a percentage of GDP, in 2021 we find differences of almost one percentage point; Andalusia is the region with the highest percentage (1.3% of GDP) and the Balearic Islands the one with the lowest percentage (0.4%). The rest of the regions occupy intermediate positions (CCOO, 2025). If we consider public expenditure per university student, the regions also show many differences, from 5,362 euros in Madrid to 9,689 euros in La Rioja (CCOO, 2024).

An important element of university funding is financial aid to students, in the form of grants or other study aids. University in Spain in the 1960s was not free, although it was highly subsidised for all students. Students had

to pay tuition fees that represented part of the cost of university education. Scholarships and grants were very scarce at that time; in 1969 only 3% of students in higher education received scholarships. In the LGE of 1970 it was stated that scholarships should be increased. In 1977 the percentage of higher education students receiving a study grant was 7.5 per cent. Scholarships were awarded based on the socio-economic status of the student's family and the student's performance; the latter factor was quite important, which meant that many students from low socio-economic backgrounds were not eligible for scholarships. The amount of scholarships was low. The percentage of public expenditure on university scholarships was 0.01% of GDP in 1982 (Fernández Mellizo-Soto, 2003).

In the democratic period, scholarships and grants were extended to university students. In the academic year 2022-2023, 24.6% of students enrolled in bachelor's degrees and 14.09% of those enrolled in master's degrees receive a general grant from the General State Administration (AGE) or from the Basque Country, which is the only community responsible for this type of grant. This is an increase compared to the 7.5% of higher education students who had scholarships in 1977. In addition, there are regional and university scholarships (SIIU, 2024). Considering all grants, scholarships and subsidies into account, it is estimated that 40 per cent of tertiary students receive some support (INEE, 2024). Also, public expenditure on university scholarships and grants rose from 0.01% of GDP in 1982 to 0.1% in 2021 (CRUE, 2024).

Comparing the average amount of grants from the 1970s to the present day is a complicated exercise. In general, we can say that the average amount of grants has increased. During the democratic period the scholarship system was changed. From the beginning of the 1980s, specifically in 1983, a regulation on scholarships was approved which gave priority to scholarships in post-compulsory education, especially at the higher level, and which introduced compensatory scholarships, which were given exclusively for the socio-economic situation of the student's family and which tried to compensate for the opportunity cost (lost income) of studying at university for these households with such a precarious economy (Fernández Mellizo-Soto, 2023). Both the budget and the regulation on grants have been subject to various



adjustments and modifications. Mobility grants, to study at a university in a territory other than that of residence, have been progressively increased. The scholarship budget suffered, like all other education items, after the crisis at the end of the 2000s. At the beginning of the next decade, in 2012, there was a change in scholarship policy, as the academic requirements for obtaining and maintaining scholarships were tightened<sup>5</sup>. Subsequently, these academic requirements have been relaxed. The balance, therefore, despite the ups and downs, is positive in democracy: the percentage of students receiving scholarships has increased, public funding for scholarships and grants has increased, and different types of more generous scholarships have been extended.

However, despite the increase in public spending on scholarships and grants for university studies in Spain, in comparative terms our country lags the average for European countries. The percentage of public expenditure on study aids, which includes grants and loans, is 0.21% of GDP in the EU27 in 2021, compared to 0.1% in Spain (CRUE, 2024). Other types of comparative indicators are difficult to interpret because they depend on tuition fee policy and grant policy design, which differ greatly between countries.

## **Discussion and proposals for university policy**

This article has reviewed the changes that the Spanish university has undergone in the democratic period. Some dimensions of university policy have been analysed, those that are considered to have the greatest impact on students' access to and graduation from university. Leaving aside other important dimensions is the main limitation of this article. Analysing the impact of 50 years of democracy on dimensions not explored in this text is a task that should be addressed in a future publication.

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<sup>5</sup> University fee policy also changed. Not only because of the overall increase in fees, but additionally because the price of the subjects was made dependent on the call for examinations; the price of the successive calls for examinations was increasing.

Table I below shows a selection of the indicators presented throughout the article, in the three dimensions analysed (extension, organisation and funding). It gives an account of the (fairly positive) balance of the changes that have taken place in the Spanish university over half a century.

**TABLE I.** Balance of changes in the Spanish university over 50 years of democracy

Indicators <sup>a</sup>	Beginning of democracy <sup>b</sup>	Half a century later <sup>c</sup>
<i>Extension of university education</i>		
Nº of students	324,036	1,762,459
Enrolment rate	12.66%	30.4%
% of students in private universities	3%	25.7%
<i>Organisation of university studies</i>		
Degrees structure	Diploma (3 years) Bachelor's degree (5-6 years)	Bachelor's degree (4-5 years) Master's degree (1-2 years)
Number of degrees	2,669 <sup>d</sup>	3,322 bachelor's degrees 4,049 master's degrees
University entrance system	Selectivity (weighs 50%)	PAU (weighs 40%)
Second chances	Access for over 25s UNED	Access from FPGS Access to more groups Validation of work experience
<i>University funding</i>		
Total expenditure as % of GDP	0.6%	1.4%
Total annual expenditure per student (\$-PPP)	2,131	16,751
% of students with scholarships	7,5%	24.6% undergraduate 14.09% master's degree 40% some aid
Public expenditure on scholarships as % of GDP	0.01%	0.1%

Source: **Own elaboration** based on multiple sources cited in the text.

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Given the complexity of comparing the same indicators, it has been decided to compare the most similar ones. Technical details are given in the text.

<sup>b</sup> Data range from 1970 to 1985, depending on the availability of each indicator.

<sup>c</sup> Data refer to the latest available data, between 2020 and 2025.

<sup>d</sup> Data refers to the 2007-2008 academic year, before the implementation of the LOMLOU.

Without going into the technical complications of studies on the evolution of equality of educational opportunities over time (Fernández-Mellizo, 2014), we can point out that, in general, the previous changes that took place in the democratic period may reduce the impact of socio-economic origin on access and progression at university. The increase in the number of universities and public places, their more balanced distribution throughout the country, the shortening of degree courses (at the bachelor's level), the increase in second chances of access to university, greater university funding, as well as the increase in scholarships and study grants (especially those linked to socio-economic status), are changes that in principle increase the opportunities for socio-economically vulnerable groups at university (Fernández Mellizo-Soto, 2003).

However, Table I also shows some indicators whose evolution invites reflection. The proportion of students in private universities has increased significantly in relation to the total number of students studying at university. The irruption of the private sector into the university system raises doubts about both quality and equal opportunities, given the high prices of their studies. The lengthening of degree courses (from diplomas to bachelor's level) and the consolidation of university master's degrees, which are more expensive than bachelor's degrees, creates a new economic barrier; it should be borne in mind that some master's degrees are compulsory for the practice of a profession. The increase and diversification of university degrees, if excessive, may not only be dysfunctional for the labour market, but also reinforce the socio-economic stratification of the different studies. The university entrance exam is now less important for university access, which may reinforce the bad practices of some centres (especially private ones) that inflate baccalaureate grades, to the detriment of the rest of the students. Due to the lack of public supply of places in some areas, the system for assigning students to different studies is very strained. There are significant regional differences in university funding. The system of scholarships and study grants has incorporated academic performance criteria, both in their award and in their maintenance, which distances it from the intended equality of opportunities. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds who lose their scholarships due to a setback find themselves with increasingly expensive

fees from the second year onwards, which makes it very difficult for them to continue studying.

As a result of the above reflection and of the international comparison made throughout the article for the various indicators, a series of aspects emerge in which Spain has room for improvement. In this respect, several challenges for the future have been identified, in response to which some proposals for university policy are suggested. Firstly, the public university sector should be strengthened by increasing the number of places offered, especially at master's level. The private university sector, especially in the distance or blended mode, should also be monitored to ensure that it offers university education of sufficient quality. Although it is the regional governments that have the leading role in this matter, the central government should try to balance the situation in the different ACs.

Secondly, the very wide range of degree courses on offer requires some reflection, especially double (or triple) degree courses; not only demand but also academic coherence and the employability of graduates, among other elements, should be assessed. Thirdly, public places on certain degrees should be increased to meet the demand and so that the grade for admission is not subject to so much upward pressure. Fourthly, it would be more appropriate to return to a system in which the baccalaureate mark does not weigh more than the standardised test, since the former is more susceptible to being altered by schools. In any case, it would be advisable to implement a system for weighting each school's baccalaureate marks to bring them into line with reality.

Finally, public funding per university student should be increased, especially in some ACs. As for scholarships and study grants, a greater budgetary rise is also needed, as well as a boost to compensatory scholarships for the most vulnerable students. It is necessary to relax the criteria of academic performance in their award and maintenance, so that they fulfil their function of ensuring equal educational opportunities.

We can say, therefore, that the history of the evolution of the university during democracy is a success story, at least in terms of the dimensions studied here. This is not to say that there is no room for improvement in some respects, nor that the Spanish university is not subject to different pressures

that could lead to a reversal. We must be very vigilant to ensure that there are no setbacks in university policy and that progress continues to be made.

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