

# Can the Green Transition Solve Spain's Educational Paradox?

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Young people in southern Europe face uncertain prospects after they leave school, with youth unemployment in the region remaining stubbornly high since the financial crisis. Equipping them to thrive in this challenging environment is a tall order, especially when many schools lack the right resources and direction. Could Spain's investment in vocational education offer lessons in how to connect education, social justice, and the green transition?

Bringing a dinosaur back to life is no easy task; it requires great skill and effort. As education specialist José Antonio Marina argues in his 2015 book *Despertad al diplodocus* (*Reviving the Diplodocus*), Spain's education system is this comatose dinosaur. An enormous creature with great strength and power, yet one that is eternally asleep. As the world changes, the education system marches on, sticking to the basic lines of a welfare state conceived of long ago. It tries - without much success - to educate the young people who will one day form the backbone of Spain's future.

Since the financial crisis, the thread that connects Spain's education system to the real world has worn increasingly thin. In 2022, youth unemployment in Spain sits at 29.4 per cent, the second highest in the EU after Greece. According to [Eurostat figures](#), one in four people who graduated from university in the last three years are unemployed, despite their qualifications. In 2007, the percentage of graduates in work in Spain was 87.7 per cent, just above the European average of 86.9 per cent. Today, the graduate employment rate lags almost 10 per cent lower, with Spain one of the worst performers on the continent.

A university degree is therefore no guarantee of dignified work. This central promise of the education system has been broken and young people find themselves studying for careers that no longer exist. Education and the economy have become decoupled. While the economy is constantly changing, with emerging sectors hungry for new skills, the education system clings to the inherited, meritocratic, Industrial Revolution-era notion that, despite all the evidence, a degree offers the route to a sound financial future.

## Turning the corner?

But the dinosaur might still wake up. The collateral damage of the pandemic in Spain, as elsewhere, left the labour market on the brink of collapse. Youth unemployment peaked at 42 per cent at the height of the pandemic, and Spain was once again at the foot of the leaderboard with the highest youth unemployment in the OECD.

At the same time, the number of students enrolled in vocational education (*formación profesional*) was on the rise. The figures for the year 2020-21 were 5.2 per cent higher

compared to the year before, leaving thousands of students without training places. After decades relegated to being a “second choice” option for those who did not go on to university – Spain is the OECD country with the lowest percentage of students enrolled in vocational education (12 per cent) – vocational education was becoming recognised as more important than ever. And there is good reason to widen the scheme. According to government statistics, the youth unemployment rate for this type of education does not even touch 7 per cent.

The question is, if vocational education offers greater job stability, why do universities remain the preferred route? Faced with this deep-rooted contradiction, Pedro Sánchez’s Socialist government – the first governing coalition to include the left-wing Podemos party – has opted to allocate part of its share of the EU Recovery Fund to modernising vocational education with the intention of tackling youth employment. Specifically, 2 billion euros have been earmarked for this purpose in Spain.

Looking beyond the pandemic, Spain had already accepted the ambitious global and European challenge of decarbonising its economy before 2050 to try to curb the worst consequences of climate change. Tackling such a transformation requires a metamorphosis of the economic and social system from all sides, especially if the socially destructive side effects of such a process are to be avoided. A just transition that alleviates inequality (and does not add to it) implies a rethinking of the foundations of all economic and social institutions.

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## **A just transition through education**

Spain published its just transition strategy in 2019. The plans combine a package of measures to be implemented at state level and through the different autonomous communities (sub-national governments representing Spain’s different regions and nationalities). The objective is to harness the green transition to open up new employment sectors. Through the previously approved climate law (*Ley de Cambio Climático y Transición Energética*) and the national energy and climate plan, the just transition plans place special emphasis on the creation of green jobs via the promotion of renewables and by developing transition agreements through state support to vulnerable sectors and companies. Education is also covered, with revisions to educational curricula at all levels to bring students closer to the future green economy, including vocational education.

The energy transition that the government’s green strategy hinges upon will require a large labour force trained in skills that are often scarce. “We need to double our numbers in the coming years because the indicators warn that more than half of new jobs will require such skills,” explains Clara Sanz, government secretary-general for vocational education.

Across the European Union, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) estimates that the European Green Deal will create more than 2.5 million new positions in green sectors by 2030. Beyond green jobs, the Observatory on

Vocational Education and Training in Spain anticipates that the country will need to cover up to 10 million job vacancies between now and 2030, mainly due to worker retirement.[5]

According to Marta Suárez-Varela, an economist at the Bank of Spain, demand for the technical skills needed to retrofit housing and install renewable energies will be crucial to the green transition. The Spanish government is betting big on the renewables sector due to the country's potential for harnessing its natural resources such as sun, wind, biomass, and lithium. Spain is the third most attractive country worldwide for green energy investment according to the US real estate firm CBE Group.

Related sectors such as construction, the installation of technical systems, and green finance, as well as emerging technologies in areas such as green hydrogen, electric cars, and energy efficiency, will soon expand. "Investment in training is essential for European funds to be effective and, here, dual vocational education – combining education with an apprenticeship in a company – plays a key role," Suárez-Varela points out. "The adaptation of training needs to the skills demanded by companies would allow a better adjustment of a labour market in which, currently, despite high unemployment levels, many vacancies remain unfilled due to the lack of workers with adequate skills."

This assessment is supported by Cedefop: "In Spain, there is a certain degree of overqualification: young people graduate with university degrees but work in jobs that require skills that could be gained with an intermediate degree," says Ernesto Villalba, an expert with the organisation's department for Vocational Education and Training policies. "Two fundamental aspects come together here: on the one hand, education needs to be connected to the world out there and, on the other, the fact that in the face of such a changing and adaptive labour market, it is important to be constantly learning."

Alongside a new vocational education law that consolidates dual training, the government's new plan seeks to modernise the training offer and create 28 new degrees linked to emerging industries including green sectors as well as new digital sectors such as data, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and robotics. The funds will finance the creation of 200,000 new jobs and support the accreditation of professional skills for those who acquired them on the job. The goal is to increase the percentage of Spaniards with intermediate qualifications (secondary school diplomas and vocational education) from 24 per cent to 49 per cent in the next 10 years. But first, the dinosaur must be awakened.

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## **Hurdle after hurdle**

Although the government's plan has been applauded on paper, experts are unsure as to how it will fit with the existing education system, mainly because the separation of work and education also stems from a deep-rooted cultural tradition. Compared to other western European countries, Spain underwent industrialisation quite late. As a result, there was no formal vocational education framework until 1975, when it was added to the well-

established humanist tradition of the universities.

This resulted in the technical professions being undervalued by society, while education legislation prioritised university degrees. The government's proposals for vocational education even refer to the aspiration to put an end to the "diabolo model", a term sometimes used to describe the Spanish education system. Like a diabolo that has ends much wider than its centre, Spain has many people with tertiary degrees and many people who hold very few qualifications, such as those who have completed only basic secondary education. In the narrow centre, you find the small percentage of Spaniards studying for professional certifications.

Unlike in Finland or Japan, Spain has no state pact for education designed to protect education systems from political ups and downs and the whims of the electoral cycle, including by ringfencing funds. Such legislation should prevent education systems going through the upheaval of constant reform. According to [independent media start-up \*Newtral\*](#), [Spain passes a new education law every five years](#); this translates into eight reforms since the beginning of the transition to democracy in 1975. Education expert José Antonio Marina has worked on Spanish education for decades: "We have passed too many laws and yet we have not been able to generate great interest in society in education: in the latest *CIS* – a state survey that consults Spaniards on their main concerns – only 7 per cent of those surveyed said they were concerned about the state of education."

This lack of consensus fuels a problem that is proving even more difficult to solve: the underfunding of state schools. At present, education spending in Spain fails to reach 5 per cent of GDP, compared to 6.3 per cent in Denmark, 6.2 per cent in Belgium, and 6.0 per cent in Estonia. In the absence of a state pact that would definitively protect spending, the money allocated to education is variable and a source of constant uncertainty. The other side of the coin is that low public spending is mirrored by high private spending that, particularly in school education, is a source of greater inequality in access to education.

Control over education policy is a devolved matter for autonomous communities. Different parties govern in the various regions, and they hold the responsibility for budget-setting. As they can also change aspects of the curriculum, the door is always open to ideologically motivated disagreements, particularly over a huge brief such as education. Following the approval of the most recent education law in 2020, which sought to prevent students from repeating years, seven autonomous communities opposed its provisions and put forward alternative measures.

These swings complicate the development of educational curricula, which creates added difficulties for teachers. According to Alejandra Cortés, permanent researcher at the UNESCO Chair in Communication and Educational Values and professor at the University of Zaragoza, "It is a question of stability, as much economic as educational. The lurching of political parties cannot influence what is taught in the classroom." [The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child](#) has itself expressly called for political consensus in order to ensure the allocation of the proper funding and connect the educational curriculum with market demand, stressing the urgency of putting an end to the other major problem of Spanish education: early school leaving.

Although the rate of early school leaving reached its lowest level since records began in

2021 (13.3 per cent), Spain still fell short of the European target of reducing dropout to 10 per cent. “A curriculum that turns its back on society’s needs leads to students dropping out of the system,” acknowledges Secretary of State for Education Alejandro Tiana. “In addition, there is a lack of places in vocational education. Most of those who have left have basic qualifications but have not found places in which to continue their studies.”

Alejandra Cortés, who also criticises the obsession with dictation and learning by rote that has always characterised Spanish education, agrees with this point: “Good development means that even early childhood education and care must take the technical into consideration. We need to teach transferable skills beyond the theoretical: technical skills, conflict resolution, communication skills...” However, developments in society leave room for hope: “Fortunately the image of vocational education is becoming much more positive: families and students see it in a much better light. It is something that should be taken advantage of.” It is not about discrediting universities but rather finding the middle ground between the two pathways: “Many students with whom I work do vocational education first and then go to university, acquiring the practical background of one and the academic background of the other. It is very enriching.”

## **Education for the future**

The threat of climate change and the political commitment to decarbonise the economy has shed light on something that was previously overlooked in the Spanish education system: the connection between education and a just transition. The rates of early school leaving and youth unemployment were clear signs that a different approach was needed. Going beyond just “teaching to produce”, the planned changes could potentially signal the classroom becoming a place that evolves in step with a world in continuous transformation.

As Tiana points out, “The great fractures in different educational systems occur when important changes in society are not reflected in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes with which society considers its young people should be endowed [...] It is our obligation to teach values, skills, motivations, and attitudes that help someone become an active citizen in the society in which they are going to live.”

Can boosting the vocational education system in order to support the green transition play its part in the wider reinvention of our education systems (and therefore the welfare state)? Like a tree, each root of what defines us as societies plays a fundamental role in overall growth. If one evolves, so must the rest. Putting an end to the idea of “university = work” and opening up other pathways may also help to germinate new models of work that address other issues. These include working-time reduction, the four-day week, longer paternity leave, and the relative importance of sectors overlooked in education such as care and tourism, both significant contributors to Spain’s economic prosperity.

For this to happen, Spain’s political representatives must make the necessary moves to facilitate an environment of change. Abandoning deep-rooted habits requires collaboration across the board. It is complicated, but evolution is fundamental to the wellbeing of societies. It all starts with education. If the diplodocus were to finally open its eyes and take the first step, the mark it would leave would be indelible, and generations would learn from it for centuries to come.

*Translation: Albie Mills | Voxeurop*

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