

Research article

The rise of private education in the Basque University System

El auge de la educación privada en el sistema universitario vasco

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Abstract

Introduction: The transformation of the Basque University System reflects a broader shift in the Spanish higher education landscape, where private universities have expanded significantly. Between 1998 and 2020, public university enrollment in Spain declined by 10%, while private university enrollment surged by 263%. This trend is also evident in the Basque Autonomous Community, where one in three newly enrolled undergraduate students now chooses a private institution. The increasing privatisation of higher education raises critical concerns about accessibility, social mobility, and the role of public universities in ensuring equal opportunities. **Methodology:** This study examines enrollment trends over the past decade, analysing the factors driving the expansion of private universities and the potential consequences for the public sector. **Results:** It explores the impact on educational equity, linguistic accessibility, and research priorities. Additionally, the study highlights disparities in Basque-language education, particularly at the postgraduate level, where private institutions primarily operate in Spanish and English. **Discussions:** The findings emphasise the need for

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policy responses to address these shifts, ensuring that public universities remain a pillar of equitable access to higher education. **Conclusion:** Strengthening public investment, aligning university offerings with societal needs, and fostering inclusive policies will be essential to maintaining a balanced and accessible higher education system.

Keywords: education; university enrollment; private education; social mobility; Basque Autonomous Community; educational opportunities; education and development.

Resumen

Introducción: La transformación del Sistema Universitario Vasco refleja una tendencia nacional hacia la privatización de la educación superior en España. Entre 1998 y 2020, la matrícula en universidades públicas disminuyó un 10%, mientras que en las privadas aumentó un 263%. En la Comunidad Autónoma Vasca, uno de cada tres nuevos estudiantes elige ya una universidad privada. Esta evolución plantea interrogantes sobre la equidad, la movilidad social y el papel de lo público. **Metodología:** El estudio analiza la evolución de la matriculación en la última década, identificando factores que impulsan el crecimiento del sector privado y sus implicaciones para el sistema público. **Resultados:** Se evidencian impactos negativos en la equidad educativa, la accesibilidad lingüística — particularmente en euskera — y la orientación de la investigación universitaria, más alineada con intereses privados. **Discusión:** Las diferencias en la oferta educativa en euskera, sobre todo en posgrados, acentúan desigualdades. La reducción del papel de las universidades públicas compromete su función social y cultural. **Conclusiones:** Fortalecer la inversión pública, alinear la oferta universitaria con las necesidades de la sociedad y fomentar políticas inclusivas serán esenciales para mantener un sistema de educación superior equilibrado y accesible.

Palabras clave: educación; matriculación; educación privada; movilidad social; Comunidad Autónoma Vasca; oportunidades educativas; educación y desarrollo.

1. Introduction

The role of education in emancipation is pivotal, shaping the trajectories of young individuals and influencing their social and professional opportunities. Education and training are fundamental to emancipation, determining prospects and pathways (Melendro et al., 2022). Families, recognising the significance of higher education, view it as a crucial factor in improving life prospects, increasing employability, and securing higher incomes. The likelihood of children pursuing university studies is strongly linked to their parent's educational attainment, reflecting broader societal trends in educational mobility.

According to Zubiri (2012), the choice of undergraduate studies is shaped by a combination of personal competencies, interests, and motivations, alongside external influences such as family background, socioeconomic status, and cultural environment. Additionally, factors like institutional prestige, gender, and language further impact educational decisions.

The literature highlights the profound influence of universities on both individuals and society. Higher education enhances access to stable, well-paying jobs while fostering social and political engagement, altruism, trust, and overall life satisfaction (Pastor et al., 2019). Universities also promote gender equality, healthier lifestyles, environmental awareness, and cultural participation. Furthermore, higher education is a powerful tool for social mobility, offering individuals from less privileged backgrounds more significant opportunities for upward mobility than any other level of education (Surinach et al., 2023).

However, access to higher education remains heavily influenced by socioeconomic status. The Ministry of Science, Innovation, and Universities (2024) reports that students from lower- and middle-income backgrounds predominantly enrol in public universities. In contrast, private universities attract students from families with higher educational and occupational statuses. Similarly, the OECD (2018) found that children whose parents did not complete high school have only a 15% chance of attending college, compared to a 60% likelihood among children of university-educated parents². These findings reinforce the persistent impact of socioeconomic factors on educational choices.

Beyond economic progress and social well-being, higher education contributes to political participation, cultural development, and the reduction of social inequalities. Universities, particularly public institutions, play a crucial role in upholding the principle of equal opportunities, reinforcing their commitment to fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

In recent decades, the Basque University System has witnessed a significant transformation, characterised by a marked increase in private university enrollment. This trend raises a fundamental question: What are the factors driving the rise of private universities in the Basque University System, and what are the implications for accessibility, social mobility, linguistic equity, and the role of public universities? This study seeks to answer this question by analysing enrollment trends over the past decade, investigating the socioeconomic and institutional factors fueling private sector growth, and assessing the consequences for public universities and educational equity. Doing so, aims to provide insights into policy responses that can help maintain a balanced and accessible higher education system in the Basque Country.

2. Methodology

We begin this article with a bibliographic analysis to examine and understand the factors that influence or condition the transition to higher education. It should be emphasised that this research is focused on the quantitative analysis of the supply of university studies, and the objective is to analyse the trends that occur in the personal itineraries of the young.

The first analysis focuses on teaching and university research and students' abilities and performance (Latiesa et al., 1990; Aparicio, 2008). The most current studies extend their fields of study to more complex areas, in addition to teaching and research, analyse educational quality, new plans, pedagogical innovations, students academic and professional expectations and their influence on later economic development, employability and social responsibility of the university (Pastor et al., 2019; Hernández & Pérez, 2021). We also found a varied analysis of the university system centred on the meritocracy paradigm (Rujas, 2022) and specific studies focused on the elites about their university studies (Diaz Egurbide et al., 2021).

At this point, it is necessary to influence the analysis of socioeconomic factors that condition the choice of university as a vector of social promotion. Two are the recently published studies on the contribution of the university system.

² The Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (2024) states that “medium and low family profiles tend to enrol in public universities to a greater extent than high profiles. Most students from private universities belong to families with parents with high occupations or high education”. Similar numbers are reported in the OECD report, “children whose parents did not complete high school have only a 15% chance of getting to college”. Conversely, in families with higher education, data rise to 60% (OECD, 2018).

First, a study explains the importance of the university as a generator of benefits and economic and social development of the university system in Spain, including public and private universities. In 2018, economic data contributed an impact of 2.12% of Spain's rank in GDP: "and its economic impact represents 2.12% of GDP. In terms of tax return, universities return EUR 4.3 for each euro invested by public administrations in their financing" (Pastor et al., 2019, p. 4).

Moreover, another specific study quantifies the economic impacts but only considers the Public University System in Spain (SUPE). The economic impact associated with the activity developed by the SUPE, from the point of view of demand, that is, from the point of view of the set of expenses and investments made in 2021, contributes to the GDP absolute 2.2% at the state level. Furthermore, the Basque Autonomous Community (CAV) has a 1.53% impact at the regional level (Suriname, Vayá & Murillo, 2023).

On the other hand, the Report of the University Board of Directors (CRUE) for the 2019-2020 academic year is pertinent. Especially the section entitled Has the supply of university studies been adapted to social demand? Where the results of the measurement between the public and private universities show two opposite realities:

... at the institutional level, the response for this period, 1998-2020, has also been different, as evidenced by the aggregate registration records for public universities (-10%) and private universities (+263%). Thus, private universities, representing only 6% of the sector at the beginning of the period, reached 20% in 2020 for the entire Undergraduate and Master's degree enrollment³. (Hernández & Pérez, 2021, pp. 90-91).

This leads us to ask the following question: What are the intervening factors or reasons for the increase of private universities?

In order to carry out a more concrete analysis, the Basque Government's University System Plan 2023-2026 (2023) has been taken into account, mainly the short-term intentions. This Report delineates development and determines the role of all universities within four years, highlighting phenomena such as teaching quality, research and internationalisation as the main ones. The present study is based on analysis of how enrollment in the universities of the Basque Country has evolved and the growth of private supply at the University of Deusto, Mondragón Unibertsitatea and the recently created European University of Gasteiz.

This work is action research because it carried out exploratory and descriptive research that provides knowledge about the limitations of searching for information in the selected databases. It is based on the conclusions of the scientific and academic contributions of the literature analysed. The objective is to review and analyse university registration data, focusing on the evolution and enrollment trends over the past decade.

The research is focused on analysing the supply of undergraduate university studies and measuring the trend of higher education levels, considering university ownership. It also aims to explore the factors influencing these educational opportunities, analysing the university supply and its adequacy to social demand.

³ [At the institutional level, the response for this period (1998-2020) has also been different, as evidenced by the aggregate enrolment records for public universities (-10%) and private universities (+263%). In both cases, this refers to face-to-face enrolment. Thus, private universities, which represented only 6% of the sector at the beginning of the period, reached 20% in 2020 for undergraduate and master's degree enrolment as a whole.].

The research carried out in the last decade to present a descriptive analysis after the change of university plans after the integration of ECTS in the university has been considered. We also analyse the statistical Reports carried out by the Basque Institute of Statistics (EUSTAT) and the portals of university transparency, which specify the entity's nature, registration data, and linguistic models. These data help to understand the segregation model in the Basque university system. This reading is vital if we are to measure the supply of public and private university students and the adequacy of supply to social demand. The main objective has been to know the current trends in enrollment and to determine how the increase in private supply conditions will help the transition to the active life of young people in the Basque Country.

Descriptive and cross-sectional research has been developed using a quantitative methodology to respond to the proposed objectives. The scope of this research has been limited to registration data of undergraduate, master's and doctoral students from the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, and the evolution of enrollment in the last ten years has been considered. The universities analysed in this study were the University of the Basque Country, Mondragon Unibertsitatea and the University of Deusto⁴.

2.1. Evolution of the Demand and Supply in the Basque University System

Information about university activity, as a legally regulated requirement, should be made available through the institutional report published annually by universities to ensure the transparency of this activity. These Reports collect data on higher education enrolment. In addition to these reports, the Basque Institute of Statistics (EUSTAT) collects registration data from the entire educational system. The first table (Table 1) reflects university enrollment data since the decade of 2010. The table also highlights the distribution of students enrolled according to the institution's ownership.

Table 1.

Students enrolled in the university by school ownership from 2010/11 to 2021/22

Basque Autonomous Community (CAV)	2010/11	%	2020/21	%	2021/22	%
Public University	52.856	80,5	49.735	71,1	49.397	70,0
Private University	12.751	19,5	20.198	28,9	21.106	30,0
Total	65.607	100	69.933	100	70.503	100

Source: Own elaboration, from EUSTAT, 24-07-2023a.

The data reflect the strength of the private university model in the Basque educational system. Students enrolled in private schools in 2021/2022 represent 30% of the total. These numbers are very high considering that in a single decade, the number of students in the private model has almost doubled. This growth in the private network challenges the influence of public universities on social mobility.

⁴ One of the challenges encountered during the analysis of official enrollment data for the 2022-2023 academic year was the lack of publication by the Public University (UPV/EHU). So, the analysis has been carried out considering those of the 2021/22 academic year. The data from the Universidad de Europa de Vitoria-Gasteiz (EUNEIZ) could not be considered since this university launched its degree programs for the first time in the 2022-2023 school year.

If we analyse the data further, the increase in private education in the decade of 2010 is exponential. This first table represents the overall data of undergraduate, master's and doctoral programs. The private model has increased from 12,751 students enrolled in 2010 to 20,198 in a decade. On the other hand, the percentage of public university students has fallen by 9.3% in this decade. In addition, in 2022, the evolution is in the same direction; in public universities, the enrolment percentages have fallen by 1%. However, private universities have experienced an increase in enrolment of 4.4%, going from 20,198 students and/or students to 21,106 (Portell, 2023; Mondragon Unibertsitatea, 2023).

This trend is also shown in the data on the evolution of the branches of education at a state level, as according to the CRUE, the demand for public and private universities has presented significant behavioural differences over time. However, enrolment in public universities decreased by 10% between 1998 and 2020, while private universities increased by 263% (Hernández y Pérez, 2021). Undoubtedly, this is a substantial change in the development of university services that have not been adapted to social demand. The registration data of the new undergraduate students in the Basque Autonomous Community confirm the increase in the presence of private universities, as it has been proven that a third of the students choose institutions of this nature.

Because of such high demand, the question is why the public university has not generated space and options for registering young people and has developed this offer in the hands of the private, elitist and segregator system, moving away from the principle of equal opportunities.

To deepen the exploration of these trends, the registration data of the three entities in this second table are classified according to the following educational levels: degree, master's degree and doctorate.

Table 2.

Students enrolled in the university by title and level of education (2021/22)

Basque Autonomous Community (CAV)	Total	Men	Women	Public	%	Private	%
Grades	58.998	26.575	32.423	41.288	69,9 %	17.710	30,1 %
Master	6.809	3.315	3.494	4.071	59,7 %	2.738	40,3 %
Doctorate	4.696	2.302	2.394	4.038	85,9 %	658	14,1 %
Total	70.503	32.192	38.311	49.397	70 %	21.106	30 %

Source: (Own elaboration, from EUSTAT, 24-07-2023b)

Mondragon Unibertsitatea (MU) develops its academic offer on four campuses: Bilbao, Oñati, Arrasate and Bidasoa-Donostia. This offer occurs in Eskoriatza-Aretxabaleta, Arrasate-Oñati and Ordizia, Bilbao, Donostia and Irun. Moreover, it is expanding its presence with new study centres in Pamplona, Madrid and Donostia. This university offers various academic programs with 18 degrees, 19 master's and four doctorates. Highlighting the laboratory of the Bachelor of Leadership and Entrepreneurship (LEINN), established in 2008, internationally recognised and disseminated in multiple locations worldwide. Students of this program can carry out internships, projects, and learning trips to cities such as Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, Málaga, Berlin, Shanghai, Seoul, Queretaro, and Puebla.

If we analyse the registration data, we emphasise that Mondragon Unibertsitatea (MU) has experienced remarkable growth since 2010, doubling its number of students enrolled in the degrees and master's degrees. From 2021 to 2022, the university had 6,326 students, of which 5,231 were enrolled to some degree, 1,005 in masters and 181 in PhD. The number of students from abroad was 564. As for the evolution of newly enrolled students from 2022 to 2023, their offer of degrees has increased, as well as the number of places to 1785 (Mondragon Unibertsitatea, 2023).

The University of Deusto has its principal headquarters in Bilbao, although it concentrates mainly its academic activity in the Donostia and Bilbao Campuses. It has seven faculties, and the University School of Magisterium Begoñako Andra Mari. It also has facilities in the Arriaga building in Vitoria-Gasteiz and the Deusto Business School in Madrid. Egibide-Arriaga offers an innovative Dual Degree in Digital Industry. The University of Deusto has 49 degrees, 14 dual and two more online. This offer includes the new medicine, nursing, physiotherapy and engineering degrees. In addition, it has 43 master's and 19 doctoral programs. From 2021 to 2022, a total of 11,215 students; 8,826 enrolled in degrees, 2,017 in masters and 372 in doctoral courses. In the same school year, 684 students came from other communities and 465 from abroad (Portell, 2023). In 2022-2023, the University of Deusto increased the enrolment of undergraduate students to 9,404, 578 more than in the previous year.

The University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) distributes its faculties on three campuses located in the provincial capitals and the following localities: in Gipuzkoa Eibar and Donostia; in Bizkaia Bilbao and Leioa, and in Gasteiz, in the province of Álava. Its offer includes 84 degrees, 106 master's and 67 doctoral programs. The evolution of student enrollment in this university coincides with the findings, highlighting the decrease in students enrolled in the public university. The official number of students quantified in the UPV/EHU transparency portal is 44,713. From 2021 to 2022, there were 35,840 students and/or official students in degrees, 3,872 in masters and 4,039 in doctoral studies. Data from students from other communities are unknown, but this school year, had 2,449 students from abroad, 930 in degrees, 643 in masters and 876 in doctoral studies (Universidad del País Vasco, 2023).

The European University of Vitoria-Gasteiz (EUNEIZ) offers services entirely in Vitoria-Gasteiz. This university offers 12 grades and four master's in Psychology, Physiotherapy, Physical Activity and Sport Sciences, Cybersecurity and Multimedia. The following grades should be highlighted: Psychology, Music and Sound Production for the Entertainment Industry, Design and Development of Video Games, Art for Video Games, Multimedia, Cybersecurity, Data Science, Physiotherapy, Physical Activity and Sport Sciences, Podiatry and Sports Management. This offer includes a dual degree in Physical Therapy and Sciences of Physical Activity and Sport. Although the data provided does not include EUNEIZ, it should be noted that the offer of new admission for the course 2024/2025 is 505 students. However, this university will exceed the 2000 students when the undergraduate offer is completed. By contrast, the number of master's students is minimal, with 120 students, and it is not yet known how much the master's degree will increase in the coming years.

All these data confirm the positive trend of enrolment in privately owned institutions. This upward trend in enrollment occurs not only in undergraduate studies but also in master's degrees. The percentages reveal contrasting trends between private and public universities based on the level of study. Specifically, 28.8% of students opt for private institutions at the undergraduate level, 43.8% for master's programs, but only 18.9% pursue their doctoral studies at private universities. The Basque Institute of Statistics (EUSTAT) confirms this development in its last press release of 2023:

... seven out of ten students chose to train in public universities. This proportion was maintained in the undergraduate studies, but the scenario differed in the higher levels. While 40% of the master's students chose the private system, only 14% did so to develop their doctoral thesis⁵. (Eustat, 2023a).

3. The Basque University System Plan (SUV) and Its Implications

The University System Plan (SUV), developed by the Basque Government, serves as the official framework for structuring the university system and defining higher education policies, which are updated every four years. The Plan outlines key objectives and milestones to be achieved by 2026, aiming to strengthen all Basque universities from a systemic perspective. A core strategy of the .Plan is to enhance the positioning and competitiveness of each institution, thereby reinforcing the overall capacity of the Basque University System to fulfill its educational and societal mission (Gobierno Vasco, 2023, p. 8).

Although this analysis does not explicitly assess the European University of Vitoria-Gasteiz (EUNEIZ) impact on the evolving system, it has already established itself as the third private university in the region. It is expected to emerge as a competitor to public institutions. The SUV is structured around six strategic pillars, each outlining significant milestones for the Basque higher education sector:

Workforce Integration and Professional Training: The primary goal is to double the number of students participating in professional training as part of their university education. This will be achieved through stronger university-business collaborations and a significant expansion of dual degree and master's programs.

Scientific Research and Excellence: To strengthen research output, the .Plan aims to increase the number of researchers to 5,500 and boost participation in international research tenders by 10%. Additionally, scientific production should improve, ensuring that at least 60% of published research appears in top-tier journals listed in Scopus and SJR (Scimago Journal & Country Rank) rankings.

Internationalisation of Higher Education: The goal of the Universidad+Euskadi Basque Country initiative is to expand global engagement by increasing international study programs by 25% and boosting the international student population by 15%.

Innovation in Teaching and Personalised Learning: The Plan emphasises fostering high-quality, innovative education by promoting digital transformation (ICT integration) and personalized learning pathways. Additionally, universities are expected to enhance career guidance, psychological support, and other student services to improve the academic experience.

Equity and Inclusion: The Plan aims to build a more inclusive and egalitarian university environment, it specifically focuses on gender balance in STEM fields (targeting 50% female representation) and ensuring that at least half of all students receive their education in Basque.

Social Impact and Employability: A key target is to achieve a 90% employment rate for Basque

⁵ [Seven out of ten students chose to study at public universities. This proportion remained the same for undergraduate studies, but the situation was different at higher levels. While 40% of master's students chose the private system, only 14% did so to pursue their doctoral thesis.]

University System graduates, ensuring that academic programs align with labor market demands (Gobierno Vasco, 2023, p. 68).

In conclusion, the SUV is centred on university-business collaboration, scientific excellence, and the modernisation of higher education. However, beyond these primary goals, the Plan also appears to favour expanding private institutions, raising concerns about the shifting balance between public and private education in the Basque region.

As Pastor et al. (2019, p. 19) noted, Spain has witnessed a fivefold increase in private universities over the last 25 years, leading to a substantial rise in private enrollment. In contrast, the total number of undergraduate and master's students has stabilised at 1.6 million, the proportion of undergraduate students has declined by 6.4 percentage points, while master's enrollment has quadrupled over the past decade. Consequently, private universities now account for 15% of undergraduate students and 36% of master's students within the Spanish University System (SUE).

... the enrollment of undergraduate and master's students in the SUE has stabilised at almost 1.6 million. This figure hides significant changes in composition: a decrease in the weight of undergraduate students whose enrolment has been reduced by 6.4 percentage points, and an increase in the weight of master's students whose enrolment has quadrupled in the last ten years. Likewise, the number of private universities has multiplied by 5 in the last 25 years, also leading to a significant increase in the weight of private universities that now account for 15% of the undergraduate students of the SUE and 36% of the master's students⁶. (Pastor et al., 2019, p. 19).

This trend suggests a broader shift in the higher education landscape, where private institutions play an increasingly dominant role. While this growth may provide students with more educational choices, it also raises questions about accessibility, affordability, and the long-term viability of public universities. The Basque University System must navigate these changes carefully to ensure its commitment to inclusion, equity, and high-quality education remains intact amid the growing presence of private institutions. The analysis so far includes the linguistic factor, which is undoubtedly a determining factor in this area, and the numbers show us another reality. The offer of studies in Basque needs to meet the goals set in the Plan published by the Basque Government. However, the Plan's inclusive objectives are minor in some of these institutions.

3.1. Basque Language

At the UPV/EHU, approximately half of the students attend their undergraduate studies in Euskera (Basque). According to the latest available information for 2022, this percentage has increased to 54%: "75% of ECTS credits, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, were delivered in Euskera a decade ago, this course reaches 95%" (UPV/EHU, 2023). Master's degrees, on the other hand, are offered hegemonically in Spanish.

⁶ [Enrolment of undergraduate and master's students in the Spanish Higher Education System (SUE) has stabilised at around 1.6 million students. However, this overall figure masks significant changes in composition: a decline in the proportion of undergraduate students, whose enrolment has fallen by 6.4 percentage points, and an increase in the proportion of master's students, whose enrolment has quadrupled in the last ten years. Likewise, the number of private universities has increased fivefold in the last 25 years, also leading to a notable increase in the proportion of private universities, which now account for 15% of undergraduate students in the SUE and 36% of master's students.]

Of the 107 masters currently offered, 53 are exclusively in Spanish, 16 are entirely in English, and 18 more are bilingual, English and Spanish. Only four are offered in Basque, although two can be considered bilingual because their equivalent is also offered in Spanish. To conclude, ten are offered in two languages, Spanish and Euskera, and six more are trilingual, Spanish, English and Euskera:

.... also noteworthy is that in the present course, 2023-2024, 41% of the final degree works are carried out in Euskera, while a decade ago, that figure was 34%. In postgraduate studies, in 2013, 18% of all credits were allocated in Euskera; the percentage has grown to 25% this year. In turn, 23% of the students enrolled in Euskera in graduate studies and, ten years ago, 13%; of the final master's degree works were carried out in Euskera, now 29% (UPV/EHU, 2023).

In Mondragon Unibertsitatea (MU), 70% of students study in Basque. On the other hand, the total offer for master's degrees is 22, but only three are offered in Euskera. Only four are offered in Spanish and one in English. In two languages, English and Spanish, 14 master's degrees are offered, and one more is trilingual. The master's degrees that include the study in Basque, in addition to the one mentioned in trilingual, are three: the master's degree in Teaching Habilitation of Professors of Education, the master's degree in Educational Innovation and the one in Learning Facilitation and Innovation.

Finally, although the University of Deusto does not dissect the data taking into account the number of students enrolled in its different linguistic models, in its Report for the year 2022, it indicates that 36% of the credits are offered in Basque, while only 18% of the teachers teach in this language. In addition, it highlights that only 6% of master's degrees offered are in Basque (Portell, 2023).

Regarding the linguistic analysis of the PhD in the University of the Basque Country, precisely the number of defences performed per year most of the theses defend themselves in English, the predominant language in research, and the theses defended in Euskera (Basque) are already below 10%. Forty-three theses in Euskera in 2020 out of a total of 416 (10.3%), 34 theses in 2021 out of a total of 417 (8.15%), 41 in 2022 out of a total of 485 (8.4%), and finally, 42 in 2023 out of a total of 521 (8%).

3.2. Research

Research is another key area in which the public university's current position is emphasised. This includes the funding allocated to research centres and the adaptation of research focuses. Additionally, the professional life of faculty members has been reshaped in response to these changes:

If we continue to talk about ‘returning’ to society, there is one point on which I cannot fail to insist. In the last decade, the scientific production of the Spanish university has continued to grow and gain international prestige despite having undergone cuts of 10% and competing with university systems to which budgets were increased by up to 8%. The “strong resilience” of the research activity of Spanish universities can only be explained by the immense effort and sacrifice of the university community to prevent our country from disintegrating from research and development⁷ (Pastor et al., 2019, p. 3).

The administrations in the Basque Country have considered it necessary to promote programs that externalise research from universities. However, the foundation of new research organisations has increased the decapitalisation rates of public universities, reinforcing the privatisation tendencies in research activity (Larrinaga, 2021, p. 134). Through these policies, the so-called research of excellence has been moving away from the university in terms of both institutional organisation and political guidelines. They are establishing a new dominance model within research elites, forming an international network through various newly established foundations and research institutes⁸.

Research lines directly influence and condition the trajectory of faculty, faculty, and researchers at the university (Callejas et al., 2022). It is important to note that these plans influence the positions of the international rankings regarding research. If the predominant research model shifts away from the public model -despite the public sector still playing a foundational role in offering doctoral studies- the Basque University Plan addresses the challenges associated with this trend. It impacts the professional life of faculty researchers by fostering the creation of private entities, which in turn contributes to weakening the position of the public university.

The study conducted by Larrinaga confirms the characteristics of these research groups in the Basque Autonomous Community. The following characteristics of hierarchisation have been identified in the formation of elites of excellence: One, they are primarily male elites; two, elites that work in the field of research in an intensive way of production; three, they are elites oriented to the needs of the economic markets; and, finally, four, they are competitive elites aligned with global scientific policies⁹ (Larrinaga, 2021, p. 152).

⁷ [If we continue talking about ‘giving back’ to society, there is one fact that I cannot fail to emphasise. Over the last decade, scientific output at Spanish universities has continued to grow and gain international prestige despite suffering cuts of 10% and competing with university systems whose budgets have increased by up to 8%. The ‘strong resilience’ – as this report puts it – of research activity at Spanish universities can only be explained by the immense effort and sacrifice of the university community to prevent our country from falling behind in research and development.]

⁸ [Politika zientifiko jakin batzuen bidez, *bikaintasuneko ikerketa* izendatu dena unibertsitatetik aldentzen joan da antolakuntza instituzionalari nahiz jarraibide politikoei dagokienez. Ildo horretan, *bikaintasuneko ikerkuntzarako* fundazio- eta institutu-sorta handia eratu da, nazioartean saretua. Horrela, bestelako hegemonia eredua ezarri da orain arteko elite ikertzaileen esparruan].

⁹ [Bikaintasuneko ikertzaile izendatutako ikertzaileen multzoak beste bereizketa bat ezarri du ikertzaileen estratifikazio sisteman. Honako hierarkizazio ezaugarriak identifikatu ditugu *bikaintasuneko ikertzaileen* eliteen osaketan: bat, nagusiki gizonek osaturiko eliteak dira; bi, *ikerkuntzan* produkzio-modu intentsiboan aritzen diren eliteak dira; hiru, merkatu ekonomikoen beharretara bideratutako eliteak dira; eta azkenik, lau, politika zientifiko globalekin lerrotatutako elite lehiakorak dira].

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the profound transformation occurring within the Basque University System, emphasizing the increasing role of private universities and the challenges faced by public institutions. Universities have historically been vital instruments of social mobility, providing individuals with more significant economic opportunities, political engagement, and overall well-being. As Surinach, Vayá, and Murillo (2023) point out, higher education remains the most influential factor in improving social status, particularly for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, education does not inherently eliminate social inequalities despite its potential to promote equity. Socioeconomic status, family background, and institutional accessibility shape university enrollment patterns, reinforcing disparities in higher education access.

A key finding of this research is the exponential growth of private universities in the Basque Autonomous Community, mirroring national trends. Over the past two decades, private universities have expanded their student base by 263%, whereas public university enrollment has steadily declined. This shift suggests that public universities have not adequately adjusted their offerings to meet evolving student demands, leaving private institutions to fill the gap. While private universities provide additional educational opportunities, their expansion raises concerns about accessibility and affordability, as they often cater to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Consequently, this trend could exacerbate social stratification, limiting higher education access for lower-income students primarily relying on the public university system.

The Basque University System Plan aims to promote inclusion and equal access, but the increasing privatisation of higher education may contradict these objectives. The rise of private universities, such as the European University of Gasteiz (Euneiz), intensifies competition within the sector. This competition can be problematic if it diverts resources away from public institutions, which historically played a crucial role in ensuring equal opportunities. The growing presence of private universities also raises questions about the long-term sustainability of the public sector, particularly if students continue to shift toward private institutions that offer specialized programs, perceived prestige, or better employment prospects.

Another critical aspect of the study is the persistent linguistic disparity within the Basque higher education system. While Basque-language education is a recognised priority, its implementation remains inconsistent, particularly at the postgraduate level. Public universities offer more programs in Basque, but private institutions primarily operate in Spanish and English, limiting linguistic accessibility. This gap challenges students who wish to pursue higher education in their native language, contradicting the broader goal of linguistic inclusion. Without strategic interventions, the linguistic divide could widen, reducing the prominence of Basque as a language of academic instruction.

Moreover, the role of research and innovation within universities must be examined in the context of these transformations. Public universities have traditionally been at the forefront of research and development, contributing significantly to regional and national economic growth. However, the increasing influence of private institutions and external research organisations may decentralise research funding and focus, leading to a gradual decline in the research capabilities of public universities. If this trend continues, public institutions could face difficulties in maintaining their role as leading research centres, further weakening their competitive position.

5. Conclusions

Given these findings, several policy implications emerge. Public universities must be strengthened through increased funding, strategic planning, and program diversification to ensure they remain attractive and accessible to a broad range of students. Policymakers should address the growing influence of private universities by implementing regulations that promote fairness in resource distribution and ensure that educational expansion does not come at the cost of public sector stability. Additionally, efforts must be made to enhance the availability of Basque-language programs across all higher education levels, ensuring that linguistic accessibility aligns with broader inclusion goals.

Ultimately, the transformation of the Basque University System presents both challenges and opportunities. While private universities contribute to educational diversification and innovation, their rapid expansion must be carefully managed to prevent deepening social inequalities. A balanced approach that supports public universities enhances accessibility and promotes linguistic inclusivity will be essential in maintaining an equitable and sustainable higher education system. Addressing these issues will require collaboration between policymakers, educational institutions, and society to ensure that higher education remains a pathway for social mobility rather than a mechanism for further stratification.

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