

Article

Genealogy of Depopulation Processes in Spain: A Case Study of Emigration among Young University Students

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Abstract: In the mid-20th century, the region of Extremadura suffered an important exodus of unskilled young people in search of work opportunities that would allow them to survive. Nowadays, the phenomenon is repeating itself, but with certain differences. The current emigrant is somewhat more adult, more qualified and without a specific job in the place of destination. The current study focuses on a survey carried out at the University of Extremadura among students in the areas of social sciences, humanities, legal sciences and economics in order to understand their intention to emigrate abroad once they have finished their studies. We found that there is no distinction between genders and that most of the students have direct or indirect cases of international mobility in their environment, which encourages them to take this option into account if, once they have finished their studies, their job aspirations are not satisfied in their place of origin. This reflects certain similarities with the migratory movement that took place in the mid-20th century; however, today, the objectives pursued with this mobility are quite different.

Keywords: depopulation; emptied Spain; depopulated Spain; young migration; university students



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1. Introduction

This article presents an issue that is currently of concern to society and its various social sectors: the depopulation process that many countries, mainly in southern Europe, are experiencing among young university students. These are people between 19 and 25 years of age with a high level of education who have been studying at university and are finishing or have just finished their studies. This segment of the population, despite their high levels of qualifications and preparation, does not find employment opportunities in their home country (an especially acute phenomenon in certain regions) due to the lack of solid structures to maintain a labour market in line with their qualifications.

In the literature on Spain, we can see, according to Domingo and Blanes (2016), that the new Spanish emigration, although as significant in terms of the emptying of the country (“Spain emptied”) as the emigration that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, has focused from the beginning on youth. This links to the narrative of the so-called brain drain (Alamino et al. 2010; Del Río Duque 2009; Ruiz-Castillo 2007; Santos Ortega 2013) or the lost generation, as argued by the World Economic Forum in Davos (WEF 2012), for the new migrations from southern European countries that began after the economic crisis. In Spain, therefore, we are witnessing a new cycle of emigration; however, unlike those of yesteryear, the current emigrants are professionals between 25 and 35 years of age and without family responsibilities. The Spanish migration balance turned negative in 2011, when outflows exceeded inflows by 50,090 people, according to data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE, Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2015). In 2013, this trend persisted, as Spain became the European country that experienced the most emigration: a total of 532,303 people, according to Eurostat figures (Eurostat 2015). However, now, the

variables differ greatly, especially the level of education. We are currently witnessing a growing process of emigration of highly qualified young people who have acquired at least a university degree and have an adequate knowledge of other languages and a great command of ICTs but face a labour market lacking in qualified jobs and with requirements or demands well below their skills. Despite the robust growth context in which it took place, the improvement in education in Spain apparently did not translate into higher productivity; this invites further analysis of the relationship between educational training and productivity.

To this should be added the devastating effects of the global economic crisis of 2008–2013, which plagued most European countries but was especially severe in Spain, where the unemployment rate in general, and among youth in particular, has been among the highest in Europe. This is due to the collapse of the construction sector with the so-called real estate bubble and the inability of companies to match up to the new training plans of higher education, in addition to the lack of jobs with high levels of responsibility and qualifications. Much has been written in recent years from different perspectives about the effects of the economic crisis on the international mobility of young Spaniards. Difficulties in finding employment, thanks to the economic crisis, have led to an unprecedented change in the international mobility of Spanish youth. In a political context, some praise the resilience of these young people; however, it should be noted that the political structure does nothing to assist those who find themselves emigrating, nor has it done anything to retain them. Instead, as [Domingo and Blanes \(2016\)](#) point out, it has contributed to their expulsion from the country.

Various studies have pointed to a relative decline in the youth population due to reductions in fertility and the increasing mobility of young people. This has caused a media revolution in society, but most worryingly, it will bring future consequences for the sustainability of the welfare state in Spain ([Moreno Mínguez 2017](#)). Young Spaniards emigrate for many different reasons, but the literature highlights two very important economic motivations: finding a job opportunity appropriate to the training they have received and achieving family emancipation of a residential and economic nature ([Navarrete Moreno et al. 2014](#)).

Since the mid-1970s, there has been a structural process of demographic decline that will continue over time, according to INE projections. With the reduction in fertility and, to a lesser extent, increasing geographical mobility to other countries, especially in the last eight years, there has been a progressive reduction in youth population cohorts. Society fears the absence of young people and the emptying of the country, although the possible consequences of this international mobility do not always correspond to the real meaning of the migratory phenomenon being debated with concern ([OCDE 2015](#)).

This article studies the causes and motivations that lead highly qualified young people to leave their territory of origin in a Spanish and southern European region with a high unemployment rate, where the productive market is unable to absorb a large number of university graduates each year. The study focuses on Extremadura, which, year after year, is losing its population due to the ageing of the population and a low birth rate. These factors, together with its geographical position (an inland region), its low level of industrialisation, and its lack of development, make it a region that contributes significantly to the increasingly notorious phenomenon of the emptying of Spain.

The starting hypothesis is stated in the following terms: Since there is a scarce labour market for qualified young people in the regions of Southern Europe with high unemployment rates, young people with a university education in studies belonging to the social sciences, law and humanities (weak studies) are the ones who are most affected by the greatest difficulty in finding employment in their countries and, therefore, the most likely to emigrate to other countries, mainly in Northern Europe and America.

From here, the main objective is to find out the main characteristics of the recent growth in the migratory process of young Spaniards to countries in Europe and beyond during the last few years of economic crisis as a fact that has been developing over the last

decade and which, as an element of depopulation in the country, contributes significantly to the phenomenon of the emptying of Spain.

The study aims, in addition, to show that the propensity to emigrate and the current reasons that lead university students from Extremadura to leave their territory of origin are very different from the motivations of those who left in the 1960s and 1970s and that the great majority, unlike their predecessors, do not expect to return.

2. Skilled Emigration among Young Spanish People Today

As argued above, the economic crisis led to an increase in youth unemployment, with Spain having the highest unemployment rates in this sector of the population in Europe. In addition to this, there is the structural situation of unemployment in Spain where, according to [Moreno Mínguez \(2015\)](#), there is reduced employability among unskilled and untrained young people, along with a waste of talent and investment in human capital. Therefore, the serious problems of the Spanish productive system in absorbing young, trained and qualified workers could be interpreted as a cause of the growth since 2008 in migration among young Spaniards, who leave for other countries in search of job opportunities in line with their qualifications ([González-Ferrer 2013](#); [Navarrete Moreno et al. 2014](#); [Cortés Maisonave et al. 2015](#)). Although the decision to leave Spain for other countries is an individual one, it has become a generalised fact; however, due to low mobility among Spaniards in recent decades, it has often been assigned greater significance than it really has.

The following Spanish statistical sources for studying migration are currently available: the Electoral Census of Spaniards Resident Abroad (CERA); the Survey of Residential Variations (EVR), based on registrations and cancellations in the Register compiled by the INE; and the Register of Spaniards Resident Abroad (PERE). The data on youth emigration between 2007 and 2013 (around 300,000 people in total) show a new trend; Spanish society had been relatively immobile (in terms of geographical movements) since the mid-1970s. The resistance of Spaniards towards moving to other countries has constituted one of the main obstacles to the internationalisation of Spain's productive market ([Moreno Mínguez 2017](#)). Young people are now aware that to find a job in line with their qualifications, they must move to other countries; as a requirement of the globalisation process, they accept these movements in order to progress and improve by finding opportunities that are not offered locally

The So-Called Brain Drain

Another aspect of youth emigration is the so-called brain drain. This refers to a large number of highly qualified young people who have acquired high educational and aptitudinal skills in their country of origin but who do not find a job in line with the human resources they possess and, therefore, transfer to another country to obtain one. In countries such as Spain, emigration is currently framed by a context of high levels of unemployment (closely related to continuous business delocations and/or relocations), affecting, above all, the most qualified young people. Following [Del Río Duque \(2009\)](#), endogenous growth theory sees human capital as one of the most important resources for generating a higher degree of economic development. A brain drain has a negative impact on the expelling economy, as it loses a high proportion of the most important factor of production, depriving itself of endogenous production and growth capacity. The massive loss or flight of highly qualified human resources is not only motivated by economic (higher salaries, greater benefits) or personal (independence, family emancipation) factors. There are also social motivations such as intellectual affinity, for example, in the case of researchers who see diminished possibilities of working in a network and with a group of people with a working interest in their areas of knowledge. When this happens, as [Del Río Duque \(2009, p. 90\)](#) argues, the researcher changes their social network and moves to a more developed country with a large agglomeration of scientists, generating greater collaboration and contributing to an increase in productivity. This is why scientific collaboration networks generate economies of scale and encourage researchers to change

their geographical networks. They are localised; that is, only scientists located in certain areas can benefit from the economies of scale generated by knowledge clusters. As Del Rio argues, for young scientists and researchers to take advantage of all the benefits of a developed country's scientific collaboration network, they must change their geographical location; therefore, they make a firm decision to move to another country.

The problem is that the data available on origin and destination do not include disaggregated information on the qualification levels of young emigrants, so the media debate on the brain drain is ambiguous and, to some extent, not empirically grounded. Some authors, such as [González-Ferrer \(2013\)](#), refer to the term “skilled migration”, which usually designates migration of people who have completed higher education and therefore seems more appropriate for referring to this phenomenon. However, without wishing to play down its importance, this is a worrying phenomenon: Spain is losing its best-educated young people who, faced with the difficult situation of the labour market, decide to emigrate abroad in search of better opportunities, affecting the country's competitiveness and its economic and social development ([Rodríguez Puertas 2014](#)). Thanks to the economic crisis that began in 2008, Spain is facing a new migratory scenario, very different to the migratory processes of the past. Between 2000 and 2005, Spain was the second-largest host country for immigrants in Europe ([Del Campo and Tezanos 2008](#)). Now, the migratory phenomenon has turned 180 degrees and focuses mainly on those with certain characteristics; that is, on the emigration of people with high levels of qualifications and professional skills. More are now leaving than arriving, and Spain has become one of the main exporters of skilled labour ([Rodríguez Puertas 2014](#)). This process of loss of talent in human resources has two fundamental causes. Firstly, and following [García Montalvo \(2009\)](#), an OECD report states that Spain has the highest level of overqualified young people in a group of equivalent countries; that is, young Spaniards have more knowledge than their jobs require. This is due to the deregulation of the labour market in recent years and the lack of a specialised productive fabric; the labour market is based on construction and services, which depend on the economic situation caused by the crisis. These generate highly unskilled activities that depend on the pace of the economy (construction and tourism); this makes it necessary to carry out structural reforms in the economic and labour fields. Secondly, Spain has a very high youth unemployment rate, which conditions the present and future of its young people. According to INE data, the unemployment rate rose from 8% in 2006–2007 to 20% in 2010, reaching 27% in 2013. This rate reached 53% among people between 20 and 24 years of age and did not converge with the national average until the age of 30. These data show conclusively that Spain is one of the EU countries with the most dramatic youth unemployment rate (26% in 2012, surpassed only by Greece) ([Rodríguez Puertas 2014](#)).

Therefore, the particular characteristics of employment in Spain—low competitiveness, low productivity, lack of specialised productive fabric, low technological levels, and not very dynamic markets—cause the most- and best-prepared young people to emigrate abroad in search of better job opportunities, fleeing unemployment and the lack of stability. It should also be noted that the youth stage among the most qualified young Spaniards lasts for much longer—well beyond the age of 30—as they are committed to a lengthy period in education, are not under pressure to find immediate employment and enjoy greater family support. Generally, the labour transition model causes young people to delay their emancipation from their families and their entry into adulthood. In the past, this was characteristic of young university students beginning their transition to working life, which was initially precarious but improved over time due to the training and experience they acquired. The same cannot be said now, as young people are forced to extend their youthful period but do not see their future clearly and have no clear links to their near future.

We are faced with a contradictory and complex duality. The society of the 21st century is identified as a knowledge society where human capital is the driving force of the economy. This new society demands continuous training and learning, but combined with the absence of a qualified, productive fabric in Spain, this gives rise to the important problem of overqualification, as mentioned above. This issue is not trivial and has a series

of important consequences (García Montalvo 2009). From the perspective of educational policies, activities being subsidised that do not generate the expected return for society have thus become an expensive procedure for the selection of company personnel; from the point of view of workers, overqualification generates enormous job dissatisfaction (absenteeism, low self-esteem, poor psychological health, drug problems, etc.).

Rodríguez Puertas (2014) cites a study carried out by the Sociological Research Centre in 2012. This showed that 58.3% of Spaniards aged between 18 and 24 would be willing to migrate to another European country, compared to 35.5% of those aged 35 to 44 and 24.7% of those aged 45 to 54, and the willingness to move to another country increased significantly with the level of education. This shows that, in addition to being young, the new Spanish emigrant is highly qualified. The main destinations chosen by young Spaniards are the United Kingdom, Germany, France and the United States. However, they do not only go to developed countries; some graduates in social sciences (the academic profile on which this research will mostly focus) go to growing Latin American countries such as Brazil or Peru to do research on population, economics and development issues.

Since the economic crisis, we have witnessed the paradigm of a new international division of labour. This, according to Pochmann (2011), has led to a restructuring of the capitalist system and its functioning, generating a strengthening of the knowledge economy based on a technical-scientific basis of production, with more skilled and specialised jobs. For this reason, and due to the production market in Spain, the result has been pressure on the most qualified young people to emigrate to sectors or places where the knowledge economy is developing and creating more specialised and stable jobs.

As stated by Domingo and Blanes (2016), the number of Spanish-born emigrants rose by 96% between the beginning of the crisis and 2014. This remarkable increase has led us to compare the two most important migration processes that have taken place in the country and, in particular, in the region of Extremadura. Migratory processes coexist in Spain, although their intensity changes. Although, at the beginning of the 21st century, immigration flows were considerably higher than emigration flows, since 2008, immigration has been gradually decreasing while emigration has been increasing by leaps and bounds, causing great depopulation and calling into question the future of the Spanish welfare state. Some authors argue that this emigration process is due to individual projects whose objectives include investing human capital to acquire better skills, nurturing one's capacity and entrepreneurship, or the spirit of adventure (Domingo and Sabater 2013). However, this response, as argued by Domingo and Blanes (2016, p. 177), self-interestedly underestimates what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu already highlighted when dealing with the effects of the crisis of the 1970s on the social mobility trajectories of young people: it is a disruption of the dialectic between objective opportunities and subjective hopes that mutually reproduce each other (Bourdieu [1979] 2012, p. 194).

3. The Different Emigration from Extremadura That Took Place in the 1960s and 70s

In economic terms, from 1960 onwards, Spain left the autarkic system in which it had found itself during the dictatorship and became part of the West, with a development process that went beyond national borders. In order to alleviate Spain's ruinous state, following measures proposed by various organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, the Stabilisation Plan of 1959 was established. This involved the deaths of many small companies, along with the concentration and intensification of the industrial process in the areas where the banks operated and the loss of commercial profitability of export products (which were mainly agricultural). This led to a concentration of capital and employment in some areas of the country, while others were left with even greater difficulties than before Stabilisation.

Thus, as stated by Cayetano Rosado (2007), Spain arrived at the developmentalist economic policy of the 1970s, centred on three axes: (a) the export of large volumes of hidden unemployment located in rural areas (affecting the entire western and central fringe of Spain, except Madrid—that is, Agrarian Spain, collapsed by unemployment and

the unprofitability of the primary sector); (b) the promotion of European tourism; and (c) opening up to and attracting foreign capital (benefiting the northern corniche from Asturias, as well as Catalonia and Levante, which would share with Europe the influx of surplus farm workers from their own rural areas and the western fringe of the country). These population flows and this economic model would inspire unequal national development and deepen the historical regional inequalities of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Despite the attempts to balance the country economically, the massive wave of emigrants that Extremadura suffered in this period did not have the desired effects. The region experienced an enormous loss of human capital of productive age (males aged between 15 and 45), leaving it at a clear disadvantage economically and demographically, as the active population was gradually replaced by a passive population, causing costs without generating benefits for the regional economy. Territorially, in recent years, there has been talk of the emptying of Spain, referring to rural and inland regions such as Extremadura, which continue to progressively lose population; but already in the period 1960–1975, Extremadura lost a total of 496,642 people to emigration, and its population fell from 1,378,777 to 1,066,517 (data from the National Institute of Statistics and the Spanish Institute of Emigration). This trend, except for small ups and downs, has continued, with the region having 1,054,776 inhabitants in 2022.

In the period at the end of the Franco dictatorship when Spain was opening up to the outside world, the socioeconomic situation in Extremadura was characterised by subsistence agriculture, low wages, property and wealth concentrated in a few hands, no prospects of industrialisation, and incipient mechanisation in the countryside, which protected day labourers. Emigration was then predominantly of a labour nature. The remittances of outgoing emigrants from the region, both internal and external, came almost entirely from the largest sector of the regional economy—that is, agriculture. Therefore, emigrants were predominantly male farm workers with few economic resources and little training; although, in the case of emigration to European receiving countries, they would have a work contract in origin, residence permit and travel and accommodation assistance. They also tended not to take their families with them, and most—especially those who went to other European countries—had a medium-term plan to return, after saving enough money, to settle again in their place of origin.

4. Emptied Spain and the Contribution of Extremadura

The surface area of Spain is 504,745 km², and it has a total population of 48,196,693, according to data from the National Institute of Statistics ([INE, Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2023](#)) and the Ministry of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda ([MITMA, Ministerio Transportes, Movilidad y Agenda Urban 2023](#)). Spain, therefore, has a population density of 95 inhabitants per km². This figure, by itself, does not reflect the reality of the Spanish territory; therefore, we must put it in context. Compared to other European countries, Spain is quite sparsely populated: its 95 inhabitants per km² places it far below countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Germany or Italy (see [Figure 1](#)). However, other countries such as Sweden, Finland or Norway are even more thinly populated than Spain, although this is not surprising due to the climatic conditions of these areas ([Bandrés and Azón 2021](#)).

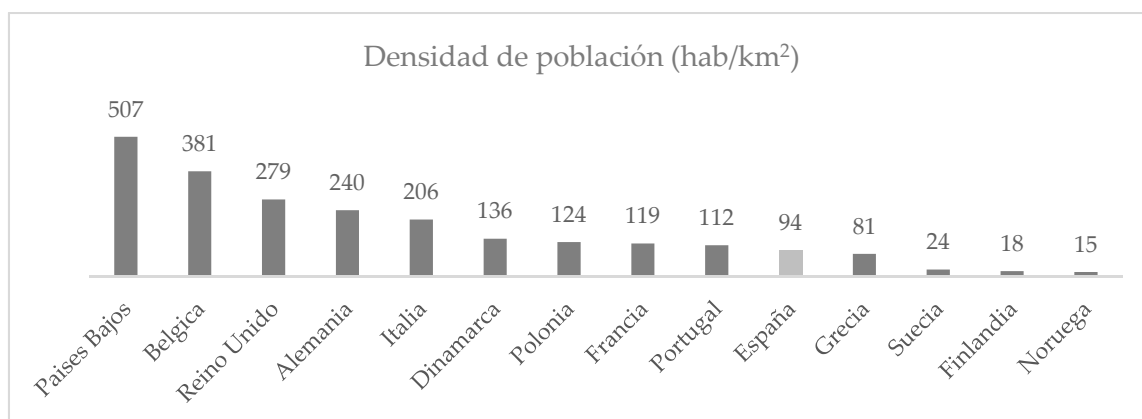


Figure 1. Ranking of European countries according to population density.

Spain is a unique case because, in addition to being a sparsely populated country, its population is unevenly distributed. The majority are concentrated around large and medium-sized cities, while areas in the interior of the peninsula are practically uninhabited; this complicates the demographic study of the territory in terms of granting aid and services.

This problem is not exclusive to Spain but extends to other territories of the European Community. To resolve this issue, in 1970, the Statistical Office of the European Union, known as Eurostat, created the concept of “Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics” (known by the French acronym NUTS). This can be applied to the different European territories and allows regions to be compared according to their demographic characteristics. This classification is revised every three years; the latest available classification is for 2021 (Eurostat 2023). The European Commission uses the Eurostat definition to draw up a demographic classification of European territories and identify the most disadvantaged ones, thus being able to allocate economic aid so that they can develop. Depopulated areas are considered to be those smaller population units with study capacity that meet two conditions:

- (1) Areas with negative population growth over the last 20 years; that is, areas that have lost total population, including natural increase and the effects of migration.
- (2) Areas with a population density of less than 12.5 inhabitants per km². This benchmark is the population density of the Lapland region, which includes territories in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia and is considered to be practically desert-like due to harsh climatic conditions.

Applying these two conditions, we built our own database in which we unified much of the data from public bodies. The result is a database with municipal information (a municipality is a “local entity formed by the neighbours of a certain territory to autonomously manage their common interests”, according to the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE 2023)). This database includes social, economic, industrial, labour and technological information. With this, we can take a snapshot of the 19 autonomous communities divided into 8,131 municipalities that make up Spain. We can then define what is known as “Empty Spain” according to the guidelines applied by the European Commission: 43% of Spanish municipalities make up the so-called “Empty Spain”, and the striking thing is that they only house 2.36% of the Spanish population. The remaining municipalities cover more than 97% of the population, so we find a population totally atomised around medium-sized and large cities (see Table 1).

Table 1. Spanish municipalities in the empty Spain.

	Municipalities		Population	
	Abs.	%	Abs.	%
Empty Spain	3499	43.03%	1.121.574	2.36%
Non-empty Spain	4600	56.57%	46.255.421	97.48%
Not classified	32	0.39%	73.800	0.16%
Total	8131		47.450.795	

Not only that but 83% of the municipalities that make up “Empty Spain” are concentrated in five autonomous communities located in the centre of the peninsula (Castilla y León, Aragón, Castilla La Mancha, La Rioja and Extremadura) (See Table 2). These five autonomous communities are home to 55% of all Spanish municipalities, and in all of them, depopulated municipalities account for more than 40% of the total number of municipalities:

Table 2. Spanish municipalities in the emptied Spain by Autonomous Communities.

	Non-Empty Spain	Empty Spain	Unclassifiable Municipalities	Total Municipalities	% of Municipalities in the Province	% of Municipalities in Empty Spain
Castilla y León	629	1.617	2	2.248	72%	46%
Aragón	255	475	1	731	65%	14%
Castilla-La Mancha	348	570	1	919	62%	16%
La Rioja	96	78		174	45%	2%
Extremadura	218	164	6	388	42%	5%
Principado de Asturias	52	26		78	33%	1%
Comunidad Foral de Navarra	185	86	1	272	32%	2%
Cantabria	74	28		102	27%	1%
Comunidad Valenciana	435	106	1	542	20%	3%
Andalucía	627	142	16	785	18%	4%
Cataluña	795	150	2	947	16%	4%
Galicia	270	43		313	14%	1%
Región de Murcia	43	2		45	4%	0%
Comunidad de Madrid	174	5		179	3%	0%
País Vasco	244	6	1	251	2%	0%
Islas Baleares	66	1		67	1%	0%
Canarias	87		1	88	0%	0%
Ceuta	1			1	0%	0%
Melilla	1			1	0%	0%
Total	4.600	3.499	32	8.131	43%	100%

Extremadura is made up of a total of 388 municipalities with independent systems of government: 223 of these belong to the province of Cáceres, while the remaining 165 make up the province of Badajoz. It is the Autonomous Community with the fifth-highest proportion of localities belonging to the so-called “empty Spain” within its territory.

However, it is necessary to analyse the two provinces that make up the Autonomous Community separately, as each has a different composition of municipalities (see Table 3):

Table 3. Extremadura’s municipalities in the empty Spain by provinces.

	Abs.			Percentage		
	Extremadura	Cáceres	Badajoz	Extremadura	Cáceres	Badajoz
Total Municipalities	388	223	165	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Empty Spain	164	115	49	42.3%	51.6%	29.7%
Non-empty Spain	218	104	114	56.2%	46.6%	69.1%
Unclassifiable municipalities	6	4	2	1.5%	1.8%	1.2%

The province of Cáceres, being the one with the greater number of municipalities, is the most depopulated, with more than half of the municipalities denominated as emptied.

5. Materials and Methods

The research presented here is set in the context of the new Spanish emigration, with special reference to the phenomenon of skilled migration. It aims to deepen the knowledge available on the structural factors and individual reasons that push young people from Extremadura to choose mobility. For organisational reasons, we chose to focus on students at the University of Extremadura, Cáceres campus. We also decided to limit the research to students enrolled in “weak” courses of study such as Humanities and Social Sciences (including Law and Economics) because students enrolled in scientific or technological study courses face a much softer and now unified European and international labour market. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that they have become accustomed, since starting university, to facing the possibility of changing cities, regions and countries. This study aims to find out whether the same can be said for students of the humanities and social sciences and the causes and reasons why some young people stay and others value work and life opportunities in another region or country.

5.1. Geographical Context

Extremadura is a Spanish region located in the centre-west of the Iberian Peninsula. It is made up of the two largest provinces of the country: Cáceres and Badajoz, whose capitals are its two most populated cities. The region, with a population of 1,059,501 inhabitants (INE, [Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2021](#)), has its capital in Mérida. With its two provinces being the largest in Spain, the region as a whole covers an area of 41,633 km², making it the fifth-largest region in terms of surface area. It has only one public university, the University of Extremadura, which has four campuses in the region; the two most important are the campuses of Cáceres and Badajoz, each located in the city of the same name (see Figure 2).

5.2. Methodological Design

The research design was based on analyses already carried out in countries such as Italy ([Ricucci 2017](#)). In the web society, the way of doing social research is undergoing radical transformations. Thanks to the diffusion of specifically designed software, the growing expertise of researchers, and the reduction in the digital divide, more and more surveys are being conducted online (so-called web surveys: [Calegaro et al. 2015](#)).

This is a random sample of 423 students, where the sample unit has finally focused on university students in their final year of undergraduate studies (3rd and 4th) and postgraduate students with university degrees belonging to the fields of knowledge of the Social Sciences and Humanities which, in order to achieve greater homogeneity, in the subsequent analysis of the data will be regrouped into three different blocks: Humanities, Social Sciences and Economic and Legal Sciences. Our motivation in biasing the sample of students with this profile of university studies (which we have called “weak studies” in the sense that purely scientific and/or technological university degrees, apparently more employable, are excluded) is justified by the initial hypothesis put forward.

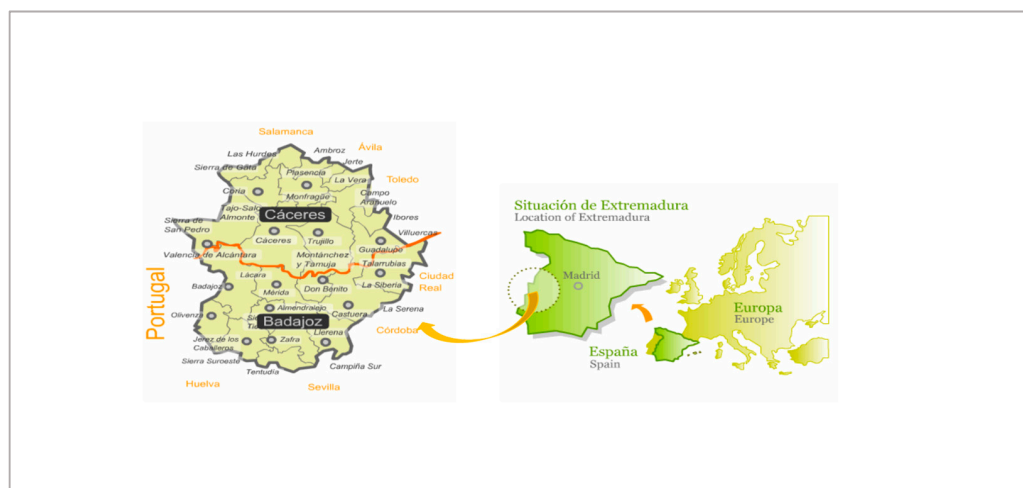


Figure 2. Location of the region of Extremadura (Spain). Source: Adapted from <https://www.viajarporextremadura.com/> (accessed on 6 May 2023).

The tool chosen for data collection was the online questionnaire. This was, therefore, an exploratory web survey. Unlike other information collection tools, this type of survey allows for a significant reduction in costs and time while reaching a large population. This tool seems even more appropriate given the focus is on a student population with extensive socialisation on the Internet. Today, there are many online platforms that support the construction and dissemination of web surveys; our choice was Survey Monkey. This tool asks the researcher to choose from the many options available, which have significant effects on the overall results of the survey (research results, response rates, dropout, measurement errors, etc.).

The main limitation of such a survey lies in its essentially exploratory nature. Since it is not possible to define a list of samples and a sampling strategy, it relies on the spontaneous participation of potential respondents, and it is not possible to identify recurrent phenomena or causal relationships applicable to the entire population, except in a completely hypothetical way.

The research process (Blanco-Gregory et al. 2019) was structured in four phases, the first three of which lasted for three months apiece. In the first phase, a systematic review of the literature on the phenomenon under investigation was carried out, allowing the construction of the online questionnaire. The second phase was devoted to the design and construction of the survey. In this phase, however, before proceeding to the final drafting of the questionnaire, brief qualitative interviews were conducted with a small number of students. The results of this pre-test allowed for a more valid and reliable construction of the items proposed in the web survey. Once the questionnaire was defined, it was implemented online on the Survey Monkey platform. The third phase was devoted to the dissemination of the survey and the participation forms among students at the University of Extremadura and subsequently to the collection of opinions and attitudes on the phenomenon studied. The fourth and final phase was devoted to the organisation, processing and statistical analysis of the data using the SPSS package (version 25), with the use of descriptive statistics but also multidimensional statistics (factor analysis and clusters).

6. Results

6.1. Profile of the University Students' Sample: Age, Gender, Area of Study, Cultural Capital and Ways of Life

A total of 423 UEX students participated in the research. Almost 72% of them were in the 20–23 age bracket, with the modal class of 21-year-olds (23.9% of the sample) standing out; this seems to be in line with institutional expectations. Less than one-fifth of the students (18.2%) fell into the 24–27 age group, while only 2.6% reported an age of 28 years

or older. In terms of gender, as Table 4 below shows, the majority of respondents (more than two-thirds) were female.

Table 4. University students' gender.

	Abs.	%
Men	135	31.9
Women	288	68.1
Total	423	100.0

In this context, it is worth noting that there are more men than women in degrees belonging to the areas of economics and law, while the opposite is true for the humanities and social sciences (Table 5).

Table 5. Area of studies by gender (%).

Area of Studies	Men	Women	Total
Economics and Law	70.4	53.1	58.6
Humanities and Social Sciences	29.6	46.9	41.4
Total (<i>n</i> = 423)	100.0	100.0	100.0

On the basis of responses concerning parents' level of education, a cultural capital index was constructed with four variants (high, upper-middle, lower-middle and low). In line with what is already known about the social backgrounds of university students, especially in southern European countries (of which it is often considered an indicator), the cultural capital of respondents' families of origin was far more often high or upper-middle than lower-middle or low (Addeo et al. 2022). However, the results also seem to confirm that university education remains a pathway to social mobility (Torre 2020). When distinguishing the results by gender, it is observed that high family cultural capital is much more common among male students than female students (see Table 6). This corroborates what is already known in the literature about the greater importance of a higher or university education pathway for the social mobility aspirations of young women, who, by becoming more engaged in their studies, strive to compensate for their traditionally marginalised status in the local labour market.

Table 6. Cultural capital by gender (%).

Cultural Capital	Men	Women	Total
Low	18.2	25.3	23.0
Medium-Low	10.7	13.7	12.7
Medium-High	30.6	27.3	28.4
High	40.5	33.7	35.9
Total (<i>n</i> = 370)	100.0	100.0	100.0

Cross-referencing the results of the cultural capital index with those related to the respondents' area of study, it can be seen that those who come from families with medium-high or high cultural capital tend to prefer economic or legal studies. On the other hand, those from families with medium-low or low cultural capital tend to prefer humanities and social studies, although the groups do not show notable differences in this variable (Table 7).

Table 7. Cultural capital by area of studies (%).

Cultural Capital	Economics and Law	Humanities and Social Sciences	Total
Low	54.1	45.9	100.0
Medium–Low	55.3	44.7	100.0
Medium–High	61.9	38.1	100.0
High	63.2	36.8	100.0
Total (<i>n</i> = 370)	59.7	40.3	100.0

Another important aspect of the condition of the students surveyed was their *way of life* or *cohabitation*. This was a university population with an eminently rural origin; more than three-quarters of the students had had to travel to the city of Cáceres, mainly from the municipalities of the extensive provinces of Cáceres or Badajoz. It is worth noting that the campus in the city of Cáceres is home to the majority of UEX degrees in the humanities and social sciences, as well as economics and law. Of the 423 students who responded to the survey, almost half lived with other people who were not family members in the “classic” condition of flatmates or university residents (Table 8).

Table 8. Ways of life.

At This Moment, You Live	Abs.	%
Alone	20	3.9
With spouse or partner	20	3.9
With one or more children	8	1.6
With one or both parents and/or their partners/spouses	160	31.4
With brothers and sisters	65	12.7
With other relatives	15	2.9
With people who are not your relatives (e.g., joint tenants)	222	43.5
Total	423	100.0

These results show the willingness of UEX students in the “weak” study areas to leave their families to complete their education. On the other hand, this is also an expected result, considering the large size of the region and the considerable dispersion of its population. While living outside the family can be a step in the direction of residential emancipation (Echaves 2016), it can often be a practically compulsory option if one does not want to spend long hours every day travelling to and from university. There were no significant differences when the results were broken down by gender, area of study and the cultural capital index.

More than half of the students surveyed were not currently employed (although some of them had been actively looking for a job recently). Of the remainder, some had permanent jobs, while others reported having precarious jobs. It is likely that this was a measure to cover some of their expenses (these students were mostly from abroad) in order to maintain their studies without putting an excessive burden on their families’ budgets. However, this result can also be interpreted in another sense: many students with precarious or temporary jobs, a very common feature in the Spanish labour market, enrol at university partly as an occupation while waiting for a permanent job (Alonso 2014; Jurado Guerrero and Echaves 2016).

6.2. The International Mobility Experiences and Main Motivations of the Students in Cáceres

We started by setting out an index of familiarity with mobility, distinguishing three positions on this dimension. Then, excluding from the analysis those respondents who did not seem to show any familiarity with mobility experiences (*absent mobility*), we focused on the other two categories. The first consisted of those who had experienced mobility but only through the migration experiences of family members and/or friends (*indirect*

mobility). The second category was made up of those who claimed to have experienced first-hand episodes of territorial mobility for a period of more than three months (*direct mobility*) (Table 9).

Table 9. Familiarity with mobility.

	Abs.	%
Absent	114	27.0
Indirect	227	53.7
Direct	82	19.4
Total	423	100.0

With regard to indirect mobility, about three-quarters of the surveyed students reported having close or non-close relatives (grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles) or friends who had lived abroad for a period of at least one year. Interestingly, the mobility experienced by their grandparents seemed to be higher than that of their parents. The explanation can be found in the fact that, in the 1960s and 1970s, there were large emigration flows from the most backward regions of Spain (such as Extremadura) to other more developed regions such as Catalonia, the Basque Country or Madrid (García Barbancho and Delgado Cabeza 1988), or other more developed countries in central or northern Europe (Germany, the Netherlands or Switzerland). These were mainly motivated by labour needs. Subsequently, until the economic crisis of 2008, migratory flows lessened in intensity due to the extension of economic growth processes to the peripheral areas of the country (Recaño Valverde and Cabré Pla 2003) (Table 10).

Table 10. Among the following persons, have any of them lived abroad for at least one year? (multiple answers possible).

	a.v.	% of Cases	% of Responses
Your parents (at least one of them)	29	6.9	5.2
Grandparents (at least one of them)	72	17	12.9
Close relatives (brothers or sisters)	26	6.1	4.6
Other relatives (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.)	130	30.7	23.2
Your friends	156	36.9	27.9
No one	137	32.4	24.5
Others (specify)	10	2.4	1.8
Total cases/responses	423/560	---	100.0

For the direct mobility experiences of the respondents, the analysis was limited to those students who reported having lived at least three months outside Spain. Therefore, the number of students classified in this category was not 82, as indicated in Table 9, but 70, which corresponds to 16.5% of the total (Table 11).

Table 11. Have you lived for at least three months outside Spain?

	Abs.	%
Yes	70	16.5
No	353	83.5
Total	423	100.0

Of these, more than half said they had done so for study purposes. However, the second most popular response on the motivations for this experience was work, with about 18% of respondents indicating a work motivation.

6.3. Working Future and the Propensity to Migrate

The sociological literature on the process of transition to adulthood in the contemporary world has noted that, after the completion of education, the next step is the search for job opportunities that allow economic emancipation from the family of origin. More than two-thirds of the students interviewed said they would be willing to move to another country, and an even higher proportion (in fact, almost all respondents) would move to another city or region if necessary. Most significantly—giving us an idea of the difficult conditions of the present labour market in Extremadura and Spain in general—more than half of the students interviewed would accept a job even if it were particularly hard, and more than 60% would be willing to work in a context unrelated to the degree they had acquired during their university studies (Addeo et al. 2022). By regrouping the answers given, two indices were constructed of students' willingness to make sacrifices in order to get a job: sacrifice to the territory (referring to the attitude towards possible territorial mobility) and sacrifice to working conditions (referring to the acceptance of suboptimal conditions). With regard to the former, if we cross this variable with that relating to familiarity with mobility, we find a high correlation (see Table 12): those who already had direct experience with mobility were very likely to change residence for work.

Table 12. Propensity to territory sacrifice by familiarity with mobility (% of column).

Propensity to Territory Sacrifice	Absent	Indirect	Direct	Totale
Low	5.1	7.7	0.0	5.6
Medium	34.7	29.7	13.8	28.2
High	60.2	62.7	86.2	66.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

However, on the second index (sacrifice to working conditions), the students were not willing to get just any job to make ends meet. Admittedly, this kind of attitude is easier if one is not (yet) struggling with the problems posed by other stages of the transition to adulthood, such as paying monthly rent or supporting a child. Something only changes if we consider this variable in relation to the starting cultural capital of the surveyed students. Those who came from families with high cultural capital showed an even lower propensity to sacrifice than the average (see Table 13).

Table 13. Propensity to sacrifice working conditions by cultural capital (% of row).

Cultural Capital	Propensity to Sacrifice Working Conditions			Total
	Low	Medium	High	
Low	56.8	27.0	16.2	100.0
Medium–Low	47.5	42.5	10.0	100.0
Medium–High	43.8	39.6	16.7	100.0
High	66.7	26.7	6.7	100.0
Total	55.5	32.4	12.1	100.0

More than half of the respondents considered it either “very likely” or “likely” that they would migrate after completing their studies. Those who considered such a move to be “unlikely” or “very unlikely” made up only one-fifth of respondents. However, it is well known that young people are the social group most prone to territorial mobility due to the uncertainty derived from the need to build an “open” path to labour and social integration, often without pre-established references from the family of origin (Echaves 2016). Once again, the propensity to migrate was higher among those who showed direct familiarity with mobility experiences (Table 14), with few differences between those who had no experience of mobility and those who only had an indirect experience of it.

Table 14. Propensity to emigrate by familiarity with mobility (% of row).

Familiarity with Mobility	Propensity to Emigrate		
	Yes	No	Total
Absent	47.2	52.8	100.0
Indirect	44.3	55.7	100.0
Direct	29.2	70.8	100.0
Total	42.3	57.7	100.0

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Although in the last decade, there has been much talk of the phenomenon of Empty Spain, such a process of depopulation had already occurred in the second half of the 20th century, and in a more pressing form: huge numbers of people were lost, especially males of working and reproductive age. This was mainly due to foreign emigration and internal migration (from less developed areas of the country to more developed areas). In that period, mobility—especially if it was international—came with a date of return to the area of origin; now, however, no such intentions can be observed in the young people who leave.

The situation of emigration in Extremadura is, therefore, not new to our times; there was a great exodus during the 1960s and 70s. The difference is that the day labourers who left during those years did so, having obtained a contract before leaving the territory, along with accommodation at their destination and work and residence permits. Nowadays, young people decide to seek opportunities abroad because of their circle (whether close or not), the better job opportunities abroad, and the higher salaries that will allow them to become fully emancipated at the economic and family levels. In addition, today's migrant is qualified (unlike the migrants of the mid-20th century) and somewhat older due to a longer period of education, obtaining a higher level of training than previously.

Intentions to go abroad are not the same for science and technology students as among social science students. The former, on completing their studies, are faced with a unified labour market throughout Europe; this is not the case for the latter group. In research presented on the characteristics of emigration by young university students, although the social sciences, humanities, economics and law have been classified as “weak” studies from the perspective of labour market insertion, more women than men focus on them as a means of social mobility. However, it is young men who are more likely to emigrate in search of a job more in line with the training they have received.

In our attempt to present a genealogy of the two migratory processes separated by around half a century, we observed that in the 1960s and 70s, the emigrant population was mainly male and unskilled, but with a job waiting for them in the main receiving countries. The current emigration does not present so many differences in terms of gender, but it involves a highly qualified population who leave in search of a job that is not guaranteed beforehand, although it is true that the chances of finding one are greater in Northern Europe than in Spain. The cultural capital of today's young university students who plan their working future by emigrating to other countries is generally high—unlike the emigrants of yesteryear, who, in addition to having low qualifications, had very low cultural capital. In other words, in the 60s and 70s, university education was not by any stretch of the imagination a means of social mobility, as [Torre \(2020\)](#) states for the young population of today. In those years, in Extremadura, those with university experience constituted a much smaller proportion of the population than in the second decade of the 21st century. Then, the probability of finding employment in line with such training was very high; also, university students generally belonged to upper social classes that obviously did not have economic problems of subsistence.

Nowadays, ways of life while studying at university help to generate experience in living independently and outside the family; this is an important factor in the subsequent decision to leave the country in search of better living conditions. However, this was not the case sixty years ago. Then, in general, emigrants had no such previous experiences to

contribute to their decision to go into exile, which was conditioned primarily and almost exclusively by the fact of vital necessity.

Despite the data showing a generally high propensity to emigrate among young university students, those who have had direct experience of emigration with their parents are the ones who are most willing to leave, but not just to get any precarious job that is not related to their training. They are willing to make that sacrifice as long as they get a job that meets their expectations. In the previous century, the only thing that mattered in emigration was to obtain money to support oneself and live. However, the propensity is not only to move from Extremadura to other countries. Almost all the respondents to the study stated that they were willing to move to another region; this means that the problem of depopulation in Extremadura could become even more acute if young people do not find satisfactory job opportunities. It is already the Autonomous Community with the fifth-highest percentage of depopulated municipalities (two-fifths of the total).

Successive processes of depopulation and ageing have taken place before and are taking place now, but not in a linear fashion, as the intensity has not been the same due to different processes of economic growth in the peripheral areas of the country (Recaño Valverde and Cabré Pla 2003). As Cayetano Rosado (2007) points out, referring to the consequences of emigration from Extremadura in the 1960s and 70s, the region was lagging behind in terms of production and the economy in general; by the mid-1970s, it had not only failed to improve its position but had also suffered the scourge of depopulation and an ageing population which would weigh down its future, at least for the rest of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st. We can now add that, unfortunately, five or six years of economic crisis (2008–2012), and then the health crisis that began in 2020 and has only just ended, together with a massive increase in the number of young people going to university, have prevented the labour insertion of an increasingly qualified contingent of the population. A productive fabric that has barely evolved, or has not evolved at nearly the same pace, is, therefore, not capable, as we have seen (García Montalvo 2009), of absorbing it.

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