

POLÍTICA **C**OMPARADA

Quality versus Equality: Hard Choices in Higher Education

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Higher education policy involves a series of trade-offs among austerity, productivity, and equality. Only two of these three goals can be achieved at once. Spain currently has an elitist higher education system that is failing to produce a large high-skilled workforce – in short, it has a productivity problem. Two paths are viable: abandoning equality and combining productivity with austerity by introducing tuition fees and developing a market-oriented higher education; or abandoning austerity and massively increasing public funding to produce mass enrollments. As a bridge to the latter approach, policymakers should consider targeted public funding for centers of excellence or ‘research scholars’.



The fact that all politicians face challenges in considering higher education policy is reflective of an inherent trade-off between three potentially desirable characteristics of a university system: austerity, productivity, and equality



Introduction

Many European countries, including Spain, have experienced dramatic changes in their higher education systems over the past few decades. From a world in the 1960 where fewer than five percent of people went to university, we now have majorities of school-leavers attending university (if not graduating) in countries from England to Portugal to Sweden. Since higher education is largely publicly funded in most of these countries, this change is tantamount to the creation of a new welfare state entitlement, gradually expanding throughout the population.

This presents serious challenges to political parties of all partisan stripes. These challenges are both apolitical and political. For all parties the increased public cost of higher education presents a fiscal challenge, particularly in the current era of austerity. How to pay for a majority of the country attending university is a novel question for this generation of politicians, who must do so while also dealing with the strains imposed by an aging population.

But there are also different challenges facing different political parties. For the right, increased public spending on higher education runs up against a partisan desire to keep taxes low and to support private institutions in the provision of previously public services. The left face a different problem. While public spending is not contrary to the preferences of left-wing parties, spending on higher education may mean reduced spending elsewhere, particularly in an era of fiscal austerity. Since most higher education systems are still biased towards enrolling the children of the upper middle classes, public spending on higher education may be fiscally regressive and therefore less attractive for social democrats.

The fact that all politicians face challenges in considering higher education policy is reflective of an inherent trade-off between three potentially desirable characteristics of a university system: *austerity*, *productivity*, and *equality*. No system can achieve all these goals at once, and hence difficult decisions are unavoidable.

By *austerity*, I mean the desire for a higher education system that presents a limited strain on the public purse. Before the 1960s, enrollments in universities were so small, often less than five percent of a cohort, that full public subsidization of universities was inexpensive. As enrollments rose from the 1970s onwards, so too did demands on public resources. Today public spending on universities among OECD countries varies between 0.6% of national income (Italy) and 1.7% (Finland and Swe-



A transition to either a Partially Private or Mass Public system would fundamentally alter the supply of skilled workers into the Spanish workforce, and presuming employers adapted their hiring and production strategies to use an increased stream of graduate labor, this could have salutary effects for the Spanish economy

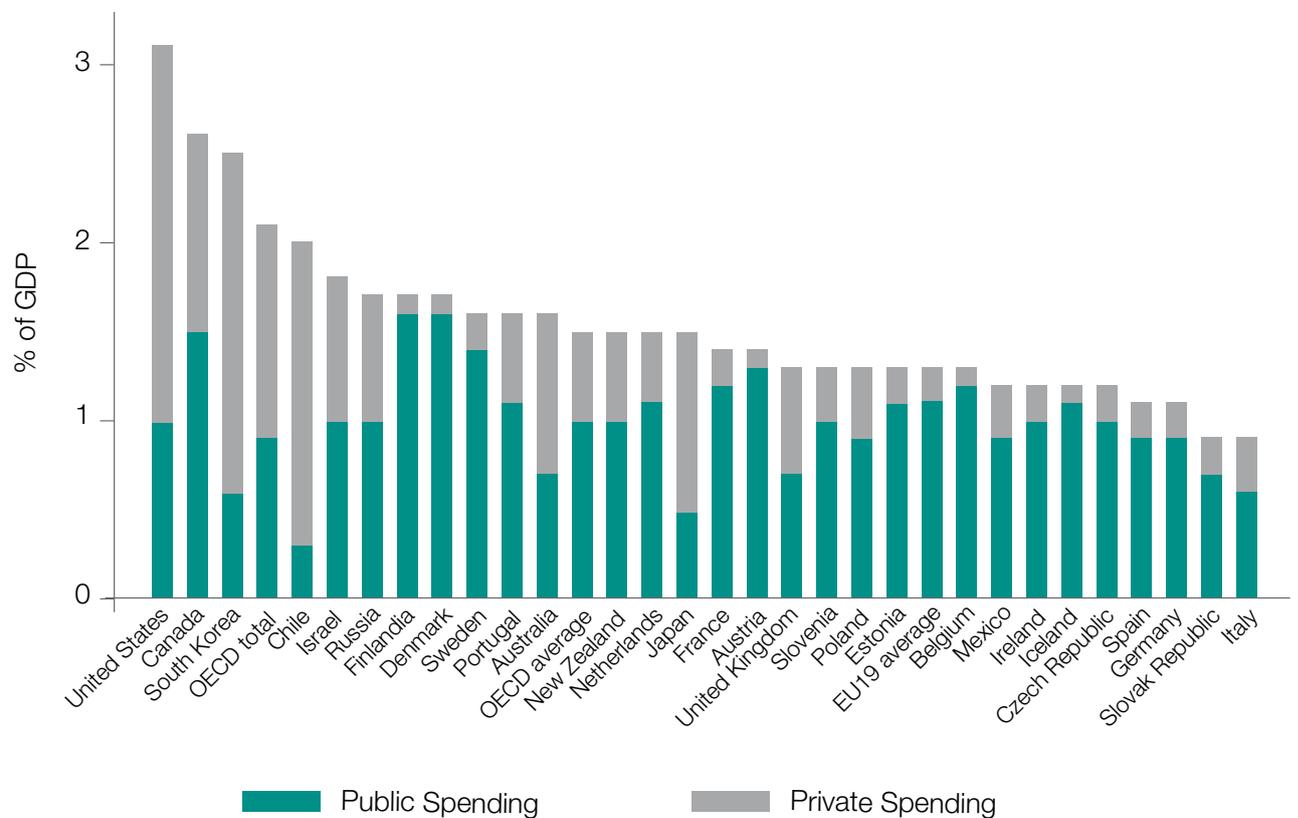


den). Figure One shows total public and private spending on higher education in 2008 for several OECD countries. Taking private sources into account, collectively countries like the Canada, Chile, and South Korea spend over 2% of national income on higher education, whereas the United States spends over 3%. Although these high total spenders rely on high levels of private funding, clearly, the potential level of spending that *could* come from government coffers is very high. Symmetrically, as higher education has become a larger slice of the economic pie, it has become a more attractive target for politicians looking for cuts in the name of austerity. The Cameron government in the UK, for example, has cut public funding to universities by forty percent as part of its austerity drive. The Spanish higher education system, at present, is relatively inexpensive, costing less than one percent of national income from the public purse. As Figure One shows this places Spain among the very lowest total spenders in the OECD both in total and in terms of public spending alone.

By *productivity*, I mean the development of a higher education system that produces 'world class' skills, thereby creating a mass highly educated workforce that is competitive in global markets. The comparative advantage of European countries, particularly those of Southern Europe can no longer be in low-wage manufacturing, given ever-increasing trade with the developing world. Instead, all European countries will need to focus on exporting high-skill content goods, where Europe retains a global advantage. Yet such goods require a high-skilled workforce, likely one with a majority of citizens with university education. Many OECD countries now have well over sixty percent of young people entering university, for example Australia, Norway, Finland, and the USA. Figure Two shows gross entry rates into higher education across the OECD in 2008.

The idea of a majority graduate workforce is one that is often greeted skeptically – how can the economy absorb so many graduates? Won't they compete for the same jobs and push down the returns to university? In fact, OECD countries have been able to expand university education with relatively little impact on the 'skill premium' – the relative wage of graduates versus non-graduates. On average, university graduates continue to earn around seventy-five percent more than those with solely secondary school qualifications, and the private value of a university education in terms of increased wages and reduced chances of unemployment greatly outweighs both the direct and indirect costs of a university education. It is notable that though most OECD countries now have a majority of young people entering university, Spain has among the lowest entry rates (around forty percent) and its entry rate actually declined between 2000 and 2008 as can be seen in Figure Two.

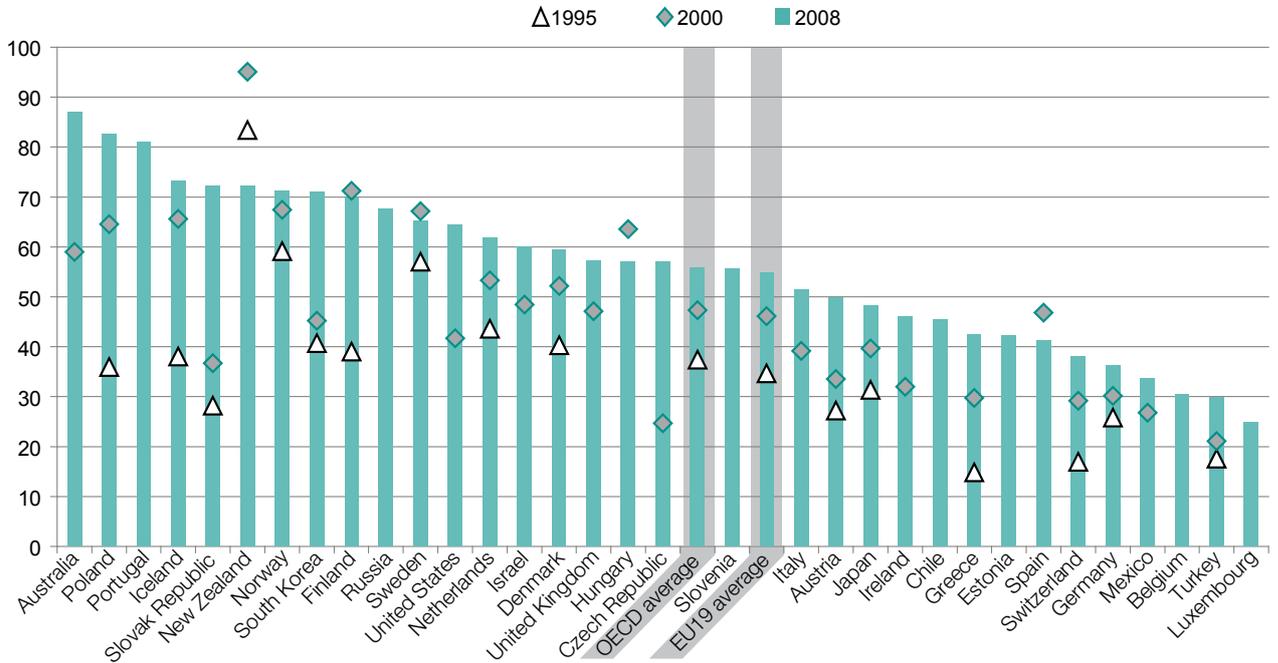
Figure One: Public / Private Spending on Higher Education in the OECD



Source: author's calculations using data from OECD Education at a Glance, 2010

By *equality*, I mean a university system that is equally affordable for all students, and that avoids free market outcomes in access to education and in competition among universities. For many European countries, the concept of solidarity among citizens has translated into solidarity among students and even among universities. If students are fully funded by the state to attend university, then family wealth has no *direct* impact on the ability to attend university. Similarly, if all national universities are considered to be of equal quality and have equal claims on public resources, then regardless of where students attend, their university education should be of an equivalent quality. These concerns understandably make policymakers in many European countries nervous about the introduction of private financing, particularly through tuition fees. Equality among students, it is argued, will be compromised by tying access to university to ability to pay. Similarly, equality among universities will be undermined by the competitive pursuit of tuition-paying students and of private money from alumni or from industry. For many European policymakers, the higher education system is a bulwark against undesirable market forces that would hasten inequality.

Figure Two: Differences in Enrollment in the OECD



Source: from OECD Education at a Glance 2010.

Private spending varies greatly across the OECD: over eighty percent of South Korean higher education funding comes private sources, and over fifty percent does so in the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia. By contrast in the Scandinavian countries, less than ten percent of funding comes from private sources. Spain, for its part, looks very much more like the latter countries, with around twenty percent of funding from private sources. Similarly, in the Anglo-American and Asian countries a clear hierarchy of universities exists, with much focus on competitive league tables, whereas in Scandinavia and much of Southern Europe universities are treated, at least formally, as equals.

Why is it not possible to achieve these goals of austerity, productivity, and equality at the same time? A system that manages austerity – low public spending – and productivity – a mass well-trained graduate workforce – can do so only by introducing private money through tuition fees and competition for money from industry, thereby undermining equality among students and among universities. The cost of college education for a supermajority of the population is simply too expensive to finance publicly while maintaining austerity. This has been the choice made in America, in



A Mass Public system requires sizable increases in public spending on higher education: in Spain, this might mean a near-doubling from 0.8% of GDP to 1.5% or thereabouts. While, in the long run, this approach might be viable, given Spain's current fiscal straightjacket this does not seem a viable short-term solution



Australia, and recently in the UK, which I have referred to in academic and popular work as a *Partially Private* system (Ansell 2008, 2010; Ansell and Culpepper, 2011).

A higher education system that manages productivity and equality must, for the same reasons, sacrifice austerity. Mass university enrollments without private funds require much higher public spending. This has been the choice made in the Scandinavian states and, until the economic crisis, Ireland. I refer to this as a *Mass Public* system.

Finally, it is possible to run a university system without straining the public purse or introducing private tuition fees – that is achieving both austerity and equality. Indeed, this was the case for most OECD countries up until the 1970s. The cost of doing so is keeping enrollments low, and thereby abandoning productivity – the dream of a mass graduate workforce. Countries that have limited enrollments, often through quotas on entry, such as Austria, Germany, and Switzerland have chosen this *Elite* model. Spain too, though for different reasons than the Germanic countries, has a higher education system that is closest to this *Elite* model.

Let us explore how each of these systems functions, their strengths and their weaknesses, since doing so helps us understand what the options and tradeoffs are for Spain, an *Elite* higher education system that could choose either *Partially Private* or *Mass Public* models as alternatives.

Partially Private systems – attaining austerity and productivity while sacrificing equality – have proliferated in recent years. Before 1990 only the North American and East Asian countries had substantial private funds. However since that date, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have all introduced a substantial private element into the funding of their higher education systems – whereas all three had fully publicly funded higher education each now is over fifty percent funded by tuition fees and other private resources. *Partially Private* systems are now beginning to emerge outside the Anglo-American core – the Netherlands and Portugal in particular have shifted towards the use of private money in the last decade. Common to all of these systems is that they have facilitated mass enrollments – no OECD country with sizable tuition fees has gross enrollments below fifty percent. Moreover, of these countries, only Canada spends more than one percent of GDP in *public* funding of higher education. So private financing has gone hand in hand with austerity and productivity.

But private financing has also meant an abandonment of equality among students and among universities. While most of these countries provide various subsidies to

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poorer students so that they may attend university, the fact remains that university is not equally affordable for all students, especially as tuition rises. In the United States, private tuition fees can top \$15,000 per annum at *public* universities – at private universities they are typically between \$40,000 and \$50,000 per year. Even if poorer students can receive financial aid and borrow to make up the difference, there will be an unequal burden of student loans among graduates, when richer families can afford the full cost of tuition up front. One way around this dilemma has been implemented in the United Kingdom as part of the development of tuition fees first under the Labour government and now under the Conservatives. ‘Conditional repayment’ systems make students pay tuition (plus interest) *after* they graduate through a progressive graduate tax – in the British system, graduates pay 9% of their income above a certain threshold until the fees are paid off. This reduces the affordability issue and the inequality among students to some degree, though the very existence of fees may discourage poorer students from attending in the first place, regardless of the structure of the payback scheme.

Partially Private higher education systems also create inequality among universities themselves. This is directly related to the existence of tuition fees – by allowing fees to vary, a market for universities is created, with universities competing for high-paying students, and similarly students competing for entrance into top-tier universities. The idea that all universities in a country should be of equivalent quality is crushed under the wheels of competition – it is simply untenable to believe that a prestigious university charging four times as much as a local college is really ‘equal’. One striking implication of this is that the top universities in Partially Private countries so far outpace some of their national counterparts that they consider themselves as ‘global universities’, competing with other major universities, typically also from Partially Private universities. Indeed, almost all global rankings of universities include a large number of American universities, plus several from the UK, Canada, Australia, and Japan. Whether having ‘global universities’ is actually an especially desirable objective is not obvious, especially if doing so means worse lower-tier universities, but it does appear closely related to the use of private funds.

The advantages of Partially Private university systems then relate to the dimensions of productivity and austerity, where they excel. Tuition fees help to finance the expansion of universities and competition among universities may have a ‘leveling up’ effect, improving the quality of the system as a whole. Certainly, the Anglo-American countries have been fairly successful at the goal of a mass graduate workforce with flexible, high-value skills. As to austerity, the use of private funds limits the strain on the public purse and potentially shields universities from the state’s fiscal dilemmas,

and to some extent from partisan political battles. This independence from the state is further reflected in greater autonomy for professionals in these universities – unlike in Spain, professors are rarely civil servants in Partially Private systems. For professors this means a market for their services exists – it also means much greater inequality in the professoriate. One final note about austerity funding is worth noting. Since universities are typically populated by students from the upper quartile of the income distribution, public funding being lower in aggregate might actually be more fiscally *progressive*. Where tuition fees are in place, poorer taxpayers are paying less to educate students from wealthier families. Thus fees can, under some conditions, be more progressive at the national level, even if they make the composition of the student body more unequal. Consistent with this, the three major fee introduction reforms in Australia, New Zealand, and the UK were all introduced by left-wing parties.

The weakness of the Partially Private system is its detrimental effect on equality among students, and indeed among universities. In effect, private money and the commoditization of higher education weaken solidarity in the higher education system. Some students may have to work multiple jobs while studying to get by, while others from better off families have more time for study or prestigious internships. Universities competing among themselves may invest heavily in non-educational spending on marketing or on luxury facilities for students. In effect, the Partially Private system shares some of the pathologies of the US healthcare system – quality at the top is world-class but for the average student it is expensive, even unaffordable; prices continually rise, placing burdens on families; and large amounts of resources are used on non-core aspects of spending.

Mass Public higher education systems present a sharply contrasting path to the Partially Private model. Several Nordic countries – Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland have enrollment rates of over sixty percent, yet they have almost no private funding. Accordingly access to university is both near universal and highly equal, and the idea of ‘equality of universities’ is promoted, though obviously some hierarchy of universities in prestige still exists. How can these countries achieve both productivity and equality? By sacrificing austerity. Such systems are extremely expensive – indeed Sweden, Finland, and Denmark are the highest spenders in the world in terms of public resources devoted to higher education. Until very recently, the Swedish government even paid from the public purse for foreign (non-EU) students to study in Sweden.

The result for the Scandinavian workforce has been an extremely large skill pool for employers to draw from. Indeed, this system underpins the unique nature of these countries’ industrial structure: combining a large export sector producing high-end

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manufactured goods and services with a huge and uniquely well governed, public sector. But that sizable public sector itself places fiscal pressures on the state. Moreover, the focus on public sector employment and the absence of fees are themselves an equilibrium of sorts. The absence of tuition fees reduces the need for students to find especially high paying private sector jobs when they leave college, making public sector work relatively more attractive – at the same time, the public sector retains a very high demand for university graduates (Ansell and Gingrich, 2011). It is not obvious how well the Scandinavian higher education system would fare were the public sector to decline in size – nor how well the public sector would be able to find willing employees if tuition fees were introduced and students sought higher paying jobs. Thus the Mass Public higher education system is a key element of high public spending in general in these countries.

This link between the public sector and Mass Public higher education systems demonstrates both the system's strengths and weaknesses. The fact that governments from all parties in these states have actively promoted and financed higher education has led to a very stable stream of funding and well-resourced universities. The goal of near-universal participation has also been met and by forgoing tuition fees, equality among students and universities has been simple to maintain. This in turn has provided a source of relatively cheap (at least net of the tax costs of providing universities) skilled labor to both employers and the public sector. Thus Mass Public systems subsidize graduate labor for employers while keeping the cost to graduates themselves low, enabling these societies to achieve high levels of wage compression, since the students do not need high private sector salaries to pay back fees. It also means a stream of high-skill graduates entering the public sector itself, because of the small wage differential with the private sector, and accordingly this leads to better governance outcomes because of a highly trained civil service.

The weaknesses of the Mass Public system are that it is an austerity 'buster' both directly and indirectly. Directly, the extra expenses of creating a truly mass, public higher education system amount to between a fifty and one hundred percent increase in funding levels (from 1% to 1.5-2% of GDP). The sustainability of this spending may be viable in Scandinavia but it has not been in countries like Ireland that attempted to follow a Mass Public strategy between 1995 and 2008 but have had to radically cut back spending since the financial crisis – austerity can often force itself on states. Indirectly, the fact that the absence of tuition fees make lower paying jobs like the civil service more attractive potentially increases the size of the public sector itself. Even if the public sector itself does not expand, a 'talent drain' from the private to the public sector could reduce aggregate national productivity. A final weakness

is that, surprisingly, the aggregate distributive impact of the policy is unclear. Even in Scandinavian countries, graduates at the margin come from relatively wealthier families – at a minimum a Mass Public higher education system is not obviously fiscally *progressive* – indeed the major expansion of higher education in Sweden in the 1990s happened under a conservative coalition (Ansell, 2008).

The final type of higher education system is that with which most OECD countries began the 1970s: an *Elite* system that achieves austerity and equality but abandons productivity – that is it abandons the goal of mass, high quality, higher education. No OECD country has reduced higher education enrollments since the 1970s but in some the growth has been far slower than others. In countries like Belgium, Germany and Switzerland only around one third of students ever enter higher education – barely half the level of the Scandinavian countries. These systems are almost completely publicly funded; though minimal tuition fees have been introduced in Germany, they must be used for student services – they are essentially 'facilities fees'. Consequently, given low levels of enrollment, even though higher education is almost completely publicly subsidized it remains inexpensive in the aggregate in Elite countries, typically 1% of GDP or less. Austerity is accompanied by equality among students and among universities. Among students, the near-absence of fees means that college is equally affordable for most families. Moreover, though universities are relatively poorly funded, they are not unequally funded – there is a 'leveling' among universities in Elite systems though it may be a 'leveling down'. The equality among universities is reinforced by two factors. First, in many Elite systems, for example Austria, universities must accept all students who apply there, which reduces the ability of universities to market themselves on prestige. Second, in most Elite systems professors are civil servants and their pay and benefits are regulated by national bargaining.

The fact that many Elite systems are in Central Europe – the home of Europe's manufacturing core – is not coincidental. Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland all have highly developed vocational training systems at the secondary schooling level, typically apprenticeships. Thus, a path exists for less academically gifted (or more cynically, poorer) students in these countries that promises stable and decent wages without a university degree. This type of vocational 'streaming' means that although university students may be equal, the overall admission of students into university is not so. Poorer students are typically streamed into vocational education at an early age; even if affording university is not an issue in Elite systems, nonetheless it is mostly high-income students who do attend. Moreover, although the higher education system is not costly to the government it is generally *fiscally regressive* – poorer families pay taxes so that richer families can send their children to university for free.



Yet, none of them [recent reforms] change the Spanish higher education system at the broadest level either in the direction of Mass Public or Partially Private, since the reforms largely neglected funding and enrolment issues.



There have been changes recently in many Elite countries that suggest that a concern about the detrimental effects of a limited higher education system on productivity. Germany has permitted minimal tuition fees and these may in time develop as a financing source. More importantly, the German and Austrian states have begun to increase public funding substantially in an aim to develop 'world class universities'. The Germans, for example, have developed a €2bn fund to be distributed by a Research Excellence Foundation to universities according to research productivity, and they have also adopted the Anglo-American standard of Bachelors and Masters degrees. To this point, however, most of these reforms have been around the margins – enrollments remain low in most Central European states with Elite higher education systems.

So, what are the choices for Spain among these options? Should Spain abandon austerity (at least with respect to higher education) and aim to expand public commitment along the lines of the Mass Public model? Or should it introduce tuition fees and allow differentiation among students and universities as the price of a mass, well-funded higher education system along the lines of the Partially Private model? Or should it remain wedded to an Elite system that provides less stress on public resources and avoids the inequalities of private financing but means limited higher education enrollments?

To help clarify these tradeoffs it is worth pausing to consider Spain's economy from a broader perspective. The most cited critique of Spain's economy is a low level of productivity in the workforce, which keeps wages low, makes exports relatively expensive, and provides a steady stream of workers into sectors that are either volatile (construction) or low-pay service (tourism, retail). Higher education reform would seem a timely tonic for these problems. Spain's Elite higher education system constrains the number of high-skill graduates entering the workforce and thereby reinforces the pattern of mass low-skill workers. A transition to either a Partially Private or Mass Public system would fundamentally alter the supply of skilled workers into the Spanish workforce, and presuming employers adapted their hiring and production strategies to use an increased stream of graduate labor, this could have salutary effects for the Spanish economy. First, it could lead to an industrial shift towards technologies and products that are more skill-intensive and higher value –added. Second, an increased supply of graduates may reduce the skill premium to university education somewhat making skilled workers cheaper for employers (of course, this effect might be countered by increased employer demand for skills if the industrial structure shifts). This in turn would make Spanish exports of skill-intensive goods relatively cheaper with beneficial trade balance effects.

However, as I noted above, no higher education system is without trade-offs. A Mass Public system requires sizable increases in public spending on higher education: in Spain, this might mean a near-doubling from 0.8% of GDP to 1.5% or thereabouts. While, in the long run, this approach might be viable, given Spain's current fiscal straightjacket this does not seem a viable short-term solution. Moreover, Mass Public systems are simpler to implement with a large high-skill tax-base that can both afford the increased level of taxes and that have industrial structures already in place to absorb increased enrollment. While these conditions were true for Scandinavian countries over the past two decades, they are not in place in Spain.

Despite this caveat, a Mass Public system could be introduced incrementally. One way to do so rather effectively would be to mimic the recent trends in German higher education towards targeted public investment in a set of 'world class universities'. Although the Mass Public model generally stresses the uniformity of higher education institutions, promoting at least some strategic institutions in a first round of funding does not prevent a later expansion of funding to the broader set of universities once national finances are in a stronger shape. A targeted public investment strategy could be relatively inexpensive. While the German program cost €2bn, an alternative might be to focus not directly on expensive capital upgrading but instead on attracting stronger faculty in order to increase visibility of Spanish universities and to inject some competition into the faculty labor market. Here the strategy would look like that engaged in by both Canada and Australia. To take Canada as an example, their Research Chairs program provides federal funding for fixed-term junior faculty positions paying a salary of \$(CAN)100,000 and senior positions paying \$(CAN)200,000. Needless to say these are high salaries by the standards of Canadian standards and in the sciences they also come with laboratory money attached. Canada currently spends \$(CAN)3,000,000 on this program for around two thousand positions – substantially cheaper than Germany's program but with the promise of attracting world-class faculty and improving the status of a broad swath of universities.

In the long run, targeted spending on research might increase the international profile of Spanish universities but its impact on students is less clear. In the Scandinavian countries the extra public funding finances not only research facilities and faculty but better learning conditions for students – smaller classes, updated classroom facilities, career placement services, and so on. There is no obvious trick available to achieve these goals cheaply – they are expensive to sustain because they rely on greater per student spending. One way to achieve the goal of smaller classes and better facilities would be to find ways of using distance learning and e-learning techniques so that large lecture classes could be taught online but with regular small personal classes

with faculty to accompany them. This would cut down on lecture hall requirements and enable more students to take the same course, which may mean more students for the same fixed cost. This would help increase enrollments in a cost effective manner. Nonetheless, to maintain quality such a class requires the smaller personal seminars with faculty and it is not obvious how to cut costs on this dimension.

A Partially Private system remains the alternative. Here, increased enrollments would be funded by sizable tuition fees. As noted above, this clearly has implications for equality among students and among universities. It is sure to be resisted by both groups, with the former already galvanized by austerity cuts in general. Looking at equality from the perspective of overall fiscal burden, tuition fees might be more attractive, especially from the position of the Socialist Party, in that such fees are typically fiscally progressive – their incidence falls on higher-income individuals attaining university degrees rather than poorer non-graduates. However, since Partially Private systems typically *add* private money to existing public resources, rather than substituting for them, it is not obvious that the tax burden would immediately fall for non-graduates. A further concern with implementing a Partially Private system is the affordability of tuition fees in a country with relatively low wages and high unemployment. Asking for fees upfront at a time when the average debt carry is extremely high seems unrealistic. The alternative – the British model of conditional repayment of fees – is probably the best solution to this problem. While it puts immediate pressure on public austerity, since the government would have to pay fees in advance to universities and await being paid back by graduates, it does resolve in one stroke issues of financial sustainability of universities and the inter-generational and intra-generational fairness of funding. If such a system were to be implemented, it is crucial that an information campaign be targeted and students from relatively poorer backgrounds, since a major problem with the British reform has been a lack of understanding by poorer students that they will not be saddled with a debt burden they will be unable to pay back. A second lesson from the British case is the importance of accompanying tuition fees with 'bursaries' (maintenance grants) for poorer students, so that they can afford to stay in university given it is unlikely they will be able to rely on parental support for maintenance.

How do recent higher education reforms in Spain conform with the models I have laid out in this think-piece? A series of structural reforms were implemented in 2007 and 2008 aimed at improving quality and focusing the system along the lines of the broader higher education reform process ongoing at the EU level – the Bologna process. Degrees have been altered to fit the bachelors/masters Anglo-American model, university syllabi are monitored by a government agency, and a 2015 University

Strategy was put into place to promote 'world class' universities. Some of these reforms are overdue – the degree structure – others are well-intentioned but potentially problematic – monitoring of university syllabi. Yet, none of them change the Spanish higher education system at the broadest level either in the direction of Mass Public or Partially Private, since the reforms largely neglected funding and enrolment issues. Further development of the strategies discussed above would be needed for a major breakthrough. Spain could choose the Mass Public route and target 'world class universities' even more directly either by introducing a broad competitive funding scheme for universities like the Germans or a more limited 'research chairs' program like the Canadians. It might also think about innovative ways to use electronic technologies so that more students can attend university fully subsidized without breaking the public purse. A more radical alternative would be to choose the Partially Private option and expand tuition fees. Doing so may well relieve fiscal burdens but it is crucial that such fees be established with a strong edifice of financial support for poorer students. In particular making repayment conditional on income and using maintenance bursaries for poorer students will be necessary to keep access both high and fair. So both Mass Public and Partially Private routes remain viable for Spain. In the longer term, a choice will have to be made which route to take if Spain is to throw off the yoke of low productivity.

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