

Opening the Gates of Spanish Universities, How have their Policies Evolved During the Democratic Era?"

Abriendo las puertas hacia la universidad española, ¿cómo han evolucionado sus políticas durante la era democrática?

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Abstract: The Law 27/1964, of 29 April, extended compulsory schooling in Spain up to the age of 14, a measure that would later be reaffirmed by the General Education Act of 1970. As a result, there was a significant increase in the percentage of individuals who could potentially gain access to the university system. It was within this context that the university entrance examination, commonly referred to as *selectividad*, was

introduced for the first time during the 1974–1975 academic year, with the aim of serving as an academic filter for admission to a university system that was gradually adopting a more socially oriented perspective. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to analyze the historical evolution of this transition process, particularly since Spain's democratic transition. From a methodological standpoint, this research adopts the historical method, as successfully developed by Professor Ruiz Berrio. Through the use of primary sources, particularly educational legislation—and secondary sources, the study reveals that despite the numerous changes the examination has undergone, it continues to preserve the same essential features with which it was conceived during the technocratic period of Francoism. This model, characterized by its considerable flexibility, ensures access for all individuals, with limitations based solely on their abilities, thereby fostering the democratization of university access in Spain and contributing to the overcoming of the elitist character that had previously defined it.

Keywords: Entrance Exams, Access Requirements, University, Spain, Historical Method, Secondary Education.

Resumen: La Ley 27/1964, de 29 de abril, impulsó la obligatoriedad escolar en España hasta los 14 años, una medida que sería posteriormente ratificada por la Ley General de Educación de 1970. Como consecuencia de ello, se produciría un aumento significativo del porcentaje de personas que, potencialmente, podían acceder al sistema universitario. Fue en este contexto donde nació la prueba de acceso a la universidad, coloquialmente conocida como selectividad, que se implementaría por primera vez durante el curso académico 1974-1975, con el objetivo de servir como filtro académico para el acceso hacia una universidad que cada vez poseía un enfoque más social. El propósito de este estudio, por tanto, no es otro que el de analizar la evolución histórica de este proceso de transición, especialmente desde el proceso de transición democrática. Desde el punto de vista metodológico, nos valdremos del método histórico, desarrollado exitosamente por el profesor Ruiz Berrio. Mediante el uso de fuentes primarias, especialmente, legislación educativa, y secundaria, podremos observar como a pesar de los numerosos cambios que ha experimentado la prueba, en la actualidad mantiene la misma esencia con la que nació durante la época tecnocrática del franquismo. Este modelo, que presenta una gran flexibilidad, permite el acceso a todas las personas, sin limitación alguna más allá de sus capacidades, promoviendo así la democratización del acceso a la universidad en España y contribuyendo a la superación del carácter elitista que antes la definía.

Palabras clave: Pruebas de acceso, Requisitos de acceso, Universidad, España, Método histórico, Educación secundaria.

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1. Introduction

Analysing and understanding access to university in Spain over recent decades is a complex task, due to the numerous educational reforms that have been introduced, albeit with limited success. Currently, university access in Spain is based on a model whose foundations were laid in the 1970s, following the enactment of the General Act 14/1970, of 4 August, on Education and Financing of Educational Reform. The main objective of this study is to analyse university access in Spain from a historical perspective, with particular emphasis on the proposals implemented during the final third of the twentieth century. This methodological approach is based on four clearly defined stages (Ruiz Berrio, 1976): heuristic, critical, hermeneutic, and expository. The heuristic phase involves the identification and classification of the main sources of information. Once these have been established, a critical analysis is conducted, both externally (to determine authenticity) and internally (to interpret and understand the content). The third phase, hermeneutics, focuses on the historical interpretation of the documents, in order to ultimately provide appropriate explanations within the framework of historical research. This approach undoubtedly provides the methodological rigor required to reconstruct, understand and explain the evolution of university access in Spain over the past decades.

In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that the Spanish education system, despite its long-standing tradition of entrance examinations, has consistently upheld a fundamental principle, namely the right to education, which over time has been extended

even to post-compulsory levels of education. The right to education implies that every citizen has the opportunity to access all levels of education —both compulsory and post-compulsory—, without any limitation beyond their own abilities (Valle, 2001; Valle, 2008). This situation reflects the significant educational expansion that began in the 1970s, which has not only affected basic and compulsory education but has also extended to secondary education, ultimately leading to an increase in demand for university education. Currently, higher education institutions are undergoing a major transformation, which has led to a shift from an elite university model to one of mass education, thereby reinforcing the right of every individual to participate in the university context (Lázaro Lorente, 2022). This model strengthens the Germanic and humanistic character of the university as an institution. However, higher education institutions should not remain detached from new social demands; rather, they should seek to incorporate the past into the construction of a university for the future, one that is capable of addressing emerging challenges and demands (Colomo Mañaga & Esteban Bara, 2020).

Finally, to further explore the objective of this research, it is essential to distinguish between two concepts that are often used interchangeably but have distinct meanings from a regulatory perspective: 'access' and 'admission' (Seijas Villadangos, 2023). 'Access' refers to the general criteria for entering the university system, usually through the assessment of the competencies developed by students during secondary education. In contrast, 'admission' pertains to the specific requirements set by each institution for enrolment in a particular programme. These procedures aim to align the student's profile with the demands and characteristics of the intended programme (Revesado Carballares, 2018). In this regard, one of the particular features of the Spanish education system, clearly observable throughout this study, is that Spain typically uses on the admission score as the primary criterion for university entry. In this way, access to higher education is highly flexible; however, admission becomes more restrictive in many academic pathways, either because the number of available places is limited or because demand is particularly high.

The end of secondary education thus represents one of the most critical moments in an individual's life. At this stage, students must make decisions that will determine their future, choosing between entering the labour market and continuing their studies. In the latter case, they must also select from among the available degree programmes for which they are qualified, while adhering to the "rites of passage" established to organise this transition (Muñoz Vitoria, 1995). In light of the above, it is necessary to evaluate this transitional process from a historical perspective, examining how key educational proposals have evolved over recent decades and, at the same time, attempting to anticipate future developments.

2. The Elitist Nature of Secondary Education and Its Impact on University Access

As previously mentioned, this study focuses on the proposals for university access introduced in Spain from the 1970s onwards. However, it is necessary to begin with a brief reflection on the broader context of the twentieth century.

It is important to recognise that university access involves two educational stages: the university itself and the preceding stage, namely secondary education. The origins of secondary education in Spain can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth

century, specifically to 1833, as a consequence of administrative restructuring. That year, the Provincial Councils, then presided over by civil governors, began to demand powers from the liberal state, including responsibilities for education and welfare, which until then had been under the control of the Catholic Church. From that point onwards, although attended by only a select minority, secondary education became an ideological instrument at the service of the regime. Each successive government implemented new curricula to replace those of its predecessors, with the sole purpose of exerting influence over the educational sphere (González Bertolín, 2015). Between 1900 and 1980, fifteen new curricula were introduced, each with an average duration of four years (García Hoz, 1980). This constant reform led to a lack of definition in this educational stage, ultimately making it one of the most controversial within the contemporary Spanish education system (Lorenzo Vicente, 2003).

According to data provided by Viñao Frago (2004), secondary education in Spain throughout the twentieth century was characterised by a distinctly elitist nature. At the beginning of the century, only 32,000 students were enrolled at this level — equivalent to 28 students per 10,000 inhabitants— revealing a dual education system that separated primary education from secondary and university education. As might be expected, this situation significantly hindered access to university, as secondary education was primarily propedeutic in nature, designed to prepare students for the start of their university journey. During this period, access was conditional upon passing various examinations, such as the State Examination (*Examen de Estado*) and the Maturity Test (*Prueba de Madurez*). The State Examination was implemented in the 1940–1941 academic year and remained in place until the 1952–1953 academic year. The Maturity Test was established in the 1953–1954 academic year and continued until the 1970–1971 academic year.

The State Examination, enacted under the Act of 20 September 1938, was designed to regulate and control university access. This law advocated for a separation between teaching institutions (high schools and pre-schools and primary schools) and examining bodies (universities), assigning the latter the responsibility of assessing students' academic maturity at the end of their secondary education (baccalaureate). Thus, the access system during this period consisted of two components: one that assessed students' overall academic competence (via the State Examination), and another that comprised entrance exams set by individual universities, aimed at balancing access according to professional, cultural, and research needs, with a clear selective approach (Muñoz Vitoria, 1995). Examination boards for this test were composed of five university professors (González Bertolín, 2015).

The Maturity Test of the Pre-University Course, which preceded the University Orientation Course (*Curso de Orientación Universitaria, COU*) and replaced the seventh year of baccalaureate, was established under the Act of 26 February 1953 on the Organisation of Secondary Education. During this period, there was a substantial increase in the number of students entering university, which gave greater importance to this examination and its regulation. Initially, the test consisted of a common section that all students were required to pass, including tasks such as essay writing, a modern language test, and a short oral presentation. However, the test underwent slight changes over time, shifting from a generalised structure to one with greater subject-specific detail and reduced optionality (Muñoz Vitoria, 1995).

3. The University Entrance Examination as an Educational Response to University Demand

With the enactment of General Act 14/1970, of 4 August, on Education and Financing of Educational Reform, the Spanish education system underwent substantial changes. Among the most significant were the implementation of a new organisational structure and the extension of compulsory schooling to the age of 14. This measure, which was in fact introduced through the enactment of Law 27/1964 of 29 April, extending compulsory schooling to the age of fourteen, was later reaffirmed by the LGE (Ruiz Berrio, 2006; Tiana Ferrer, 2013). This development led to an initial increase in the proportion of students who were able to obtain the secondary education certificate and, consequently, were in a position to access the university system (Revesado Carballares, Montenegro, & García Redondo, 2023).

In response to this new context, the Aptitude Test for Admission to Faculties, Higher Technical Schools, University Colleges, and University Schools (*Prueba de Aptitud para el Acceso a las Facultades, Escuelas Técnicas Superiores, Colegios Universitarios y Escuelas Universitarias*) was introduced in the 1974–1975 academic year (Act 30/1974, of 24 July). This examination, implemented during the technocratic phase of the Franco regime and later legitimised by social democracy (Revesado Carballares, Mota, & García Redondo, 2025), aimed to objectify and standardise the university admission process, while advocating for equal opportunities, as the grades obtained by the student would determine their placement in specific degree programmes, based on the academic offer and student demand (De Carlos Morales, 2015). However, some scholars have questioned this supposed equality (Murillo Torrecilla, 1997), noting that although universities and districts share a common framework, the decentralised nature of the Spanish system allows each institution to establish its own examinations, even though the objective is the same: to facilitate access to any university institution within Spain. These differences highlight how each autonomous community interprets the regulations in a distinct manner, a situation that could be avoided if the legislation were delineated more clearly, leaving no room for interpretation of any kind.

The regulation of this examination ensured a certain degree of uniformity while also guaranteeing the anonymity of the candidates. In terms of structure, the test consisted of two non-eliminary components. The first focused on the core subjects of the University Orientation Course, with the primary objective of assessing the student's academic maturity. The different tests that comprised the first component of the examination included: text commentary, Spanish Language, Modern Foreign Language, and Philosophy. The second part of the test corresponded to the compulsory and elective subjects of the student's chosen pathway. The subjects assessed in Option A (Science and Technology) and Option B (Health Sciences) included Mathematics I, Chemistry, Biology, Technical Drawing, Physics, and Geology. For Option C (Social Sciences) and Option D (Humanities and Linguistics), the subjects were Mathematics II, Literature, Contemporary World History, Art History, and Latin (Murillo Torrecilla, 1997). Regarding assessment, the final grade was global and took into account both the examination results and the student's academic record.

A few years later, Organic Law 1/1990, of 3 October, on the General Organisation of the Education System (LOGSE) was enacted. This law introduced one of the most significant structural reforms in the Spanish education system, making secondary

education compulsory up to the age of 16, followed by two years of baccalaureate. The Unified Polyvalent Baccalaureate (*Bachillerato Unificado Polivalente, BUP*) and the University Orientation Course, in place since the 1970s, would also be abolished.

By virtue of this law, the Order of 10 December 1992 was also approved, regulating university entrance examinations for students who had completed the baccalaureate programme provided for in the LOGSE, introducing structural changes to the examination process. According to Article 7.2, students were required to complete a first exercise based on the core subjects of the baccalaureate, aimed at assessing basic academic skills such as conceptual understanding, language proficiency, and the ability to analyse, relate, and synthesise information. This section comprised three tasks on Spanish language, Foreign Language, and a text commentary with either a philosophical or historical focus (Martí Recover, Ferrer Juliá, & Cuxart Jordi, 1997). The final mark for this exercise was the arithmetic mean of the three tasks.

The second exercise, as outlined in Article 7.3, focused on three subjects studied by the student in the second year of baccalaureate (Royal Decree 1700/1991, of 29 November, which established the structure of baccalaureate), depending on the chosen academic pathway: Mathematics II and Physics (Science and Technology Option), Biology and Chemistry (Health Sciences Option), Latin II (Humanities Option), Applied Mathematics for Social Sciences II (Social Sciences Option), Artistic Drawing II and Art History (Arts Option). The final mark for this second exercise was the arithmetic mean of the grades obtained in the three selected subjects. Finally, the overall score for the university entrance examination was the average of the marks obtained in the two exercises. A minimum score of four points was required to pass.

This entrance examination score accounted for 40% of the final mark used for university admission, while the remaining 60% was based on the student's academic record, calculated as the arithmetic mean of all subjects taken during the first and second years of baccalaureate.

4. The Turn of the New Century and Attempts to Abolish the University Entrance Examination

One of the main controversies surrounding the university entrance examination in the early years of the new century has been the various attempts to eliminate it. The first of these came with the enactment of Organic Law 10/2002, of 23 December, on the Quality of Education (LOCE). In this regard, and in accordance with Article 42.3 of Organic Law 6/2001, of 21 December, on Universities, the government was to establish the basic regulations governing university admission procedures, taking into account the grades obtained in the baccalaureate.

Later, Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE), once again advocated for the elimination of the entrance examination, while introducing a Final Baccalaureate Evaluation (Asensio Muñoz et al., 2022). Royal Decree 310/2016, of 29 July, which regulates the final evaluations of Compulsory Secondary Education and Baccalaureate, established that all students must pass a final examination in order to obtain the baccalaureate diploma, a qualification that ultimately would grant access to higher education. In addition, the reform promoted greater autonomy for university faculties, allowing them to implement the mechanisms they considered appropriate to align their academic offerings with candidate demand. In

this respect, an increasing number of studies (Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2024; Garres Pérez & Bernabé Villodre, 2021; Urkidi Elorrieta et al., 2020) support the implementation of such selection mechanisms, with the aim of assessing the suitability of applicants. This would help address one of the main challenges that Spanish universities have historically faced, namely the mismatch between educational provision and applicant demand (Muñoz Repiso & Arrimadas, 1997).

However, it must be acknowledged that, in practice, none of these proposals were fully consolidated, and the model analysed throughout this study, which is centred on the university entrance examination, has remained in place (Revesado Carballares et al., 2025).

The most recent major reform was implemented in the 2009–2010 academic year through Royal Decree 1892/2008, of 14 November, regulating the conditions for access to official bachelor's degree programmes and the admission procedures for Spanish public universities. From this point onwards, the entrance examination was structured into two phases. The first phase, which all students were required to complete and pass, consisted of four exams (five exams in the case of autonomous communities with a co-official language). Three of these corresponded to the core subjects of the final year of baccalaureate (Spanish Language and Literature, Foreign Language, and either History of Philosophy or History of Spain). For the fourth exam, students could select one subject from their academic pathway. The second phase, which was voluntary, allowed students to sit exams in up to four subjects from their chosen pathway (excluding the one already assessed in the general phase). Only the two highest scores from this phase would be considered. The grade for the general phase was calculated as the arithmetic mean of all completed exams, and a minimum score of 4 was required to pass. Whereas in the specific phase, a minimum score of 5 was required for each subject to be passed. These subjects could be weighted up to a maximum of 0.2 points, allowing students to achieve a maximum overall score of 14 points.

Currently, following the enactment of Organic Law 3/2020, of 29 December, which amends Organic Law 2/2006, of 3 May, on Education (LOMLOE), a continuation of the existing model has been endorsed, preserving the core structure that originated decades ago. However, as the main novelty, a minor adaptation of the examination is planned for the 2027–2028 academic year in order to move away from a content- and culture-focused approach (Vega Gil & Hernández Beltrán, 2015) and towards a more competency-based model, one of the main educational demands in recent years. To achieve this, the number of exams will be reduced, while ensuring that all core subject skills from the final year of baccalaureate are assessed.

5. Additional Access Routes as an Alternative to University Entrance Exams

Up to this point, this paper has focused on the ordinary route to access university; however, it is important to highlight that Spain offers alternative access routes that are officially recognised (Order ECD/1663/2016, of 11 October). Thus, individuals over the age of 25 or 45, as well as those over 40 who can demonstrate professional experience in a specific field, may access university education without following the ordinary procedure (Lorenzo Moledo et al., 2014).

Applicants over the age of 25 can access university after passing an examination administered by the institution to which they intend to apply. Candidates must be at least

25 years of age or turn 25 in the calendar year in which the test is held and must not be in possession of the diploma that would qualify them for access through the ordinary route. The examination comprises two parts: a general section with three tests, and a specific section which consists of two tests on two subjects chosen by the candidate from five options (Arts and Humanities, Sciences, Social and Legal Sciences, Health Sciences, or Engineering and Architecture). The final score is the arithmetic mean of the five tests (rounded to two decimal places), with a minimum score of 5 points required to pass.

Individuals over the age of 40 with work or professional experience related to a specific field of study may also apply for a university degree without holding the required academic qualifications. To do so, they must be at least 40 years old in the calendar year in which they intend to apply. In such cases, the application must be submitted directly to the university to which the candidate wishes to apply, which will be responsible for evaluating the applicant's eligibility.

Finally, individuals aged over 45 who do not possess the qualifications required for accessing university through the ordinary route may also gain access by passing a designated entrance examination. Only those individuals who are 45 years of age or who will turn 45 in the calendar year in which the examination is held are eligible to take it. This examination comprises two parts: a text commentary and a Spanish language test, each graded on a scale from 0 to 10. The arithmetic mean of both parts (rounded to two decimal places) will constitute the candidate's entrance examination score. A minimum score of 5 points must be achieved in order to pass.

This feature is characteristic of the Spanish educational system, namely, the provision of multiple alternative routes for university access to specific groups. In contrast, other countries often rely on a single access route or, if multiple routes exist, they may lack official control (European Commission, 2014).

6. Conclusions

At this point, it can be stated without the slightest doubt that the Spanish education system, in terms of its university access policies, presents a model characterised by remarkable stability, which could even be described as somewhat entrenched. Thus, it has been observed that, despite various attempts to reform this model in recent years, it has remained largely unchanged, with no substantial modifications beyond its name, design, or structure. Nevertheless, the entrance examination continues to reflect the same essence it had when it was first introduced during the technocratic phase of the Franco regime: to serve as an academic filter for students seeking access to higher education. It is worth recalling that the university entrance examination emerged during the expansion of secondary education in Spain, following the measures implemented by the General Education Act of 1970. Initially, the examination was not designed as a selective instrument, but rather as a procedural requirement that students had to fulfil, with the sole purpose of demonstrating a minimum level of cultural knowledge before beginning their university studies. In this regard, the examination has demonstrated considerable flexibility, as evidenced by the latest data published by the Ministerio de Universidades (2025), which show that 90.4% of students who registered for the most recent examination session, held in the 2024–2025 academic year, successfully passed it. Therefore, the university entrance examination does not, in practice, exhibit a selective nature.

But why have no substantial changes been introduced in Spain's university access

policies? Fundamentally, this is due to the broad social consensus surrounding this examination, which carefully upholds two of the core principles underpinning the Spanish education system: the right to education and equal opportunities. As a result, university access remains highly flexible, enabling all students who wish to enrol to do so without restrictions other than those related to their own academic abilities. This open model, which Spain has maintained over recent decades, has led to a democratisation of its policies, representing the transition from elite to mass higher education.

What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that despite the numerous proposals implemented —some more significant than others— the certificate of post-compulsory secondary education (i.e., the University Orientation Course prior to the implementation of the LOGSE, or the baccalaureate diploma thereafter) has continued to play a key role in the process. Although passing the entrance examination has consistently been an essential requirement for university admission, the weighting given to students' academic records during their final years of schooling significantly influences their academic trajectory. However, following the most recent reform (Royal Decree 1892/2008, of 14 November), the relative influence of students' academic records has been reduced. Although the weighting of students' academic records remains at 60% of the total admission score, the maximum score a student can achieve has been raised to 14 points, thereby increasing the significance of the entrance examination overall, and of its specific phase in particular.

Finally, a prospective analysis of the examination suggests that it will undergo minor changes in terms of content, becoming more competency-based and less focused on memorisation. Such modification may lead to significant changes in the purpose of the examination, which, in turn, could cause some social controversy. Indeed, the reforms proposed in recent years regarding university access have not met with widespread consensus, as they have been perceived as potentially undermining one of the fundamental principles of the Spanish education system: the right to education.

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