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ESTUDIOS

≡ The vocational  
education and training  
system in La Rioja

Executive summary

# The vocational education and training system in La Rioja

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

The starting point of this study is the idea that a region's vocational education and training (VET) system is a fundamental part of its innovation system and must serve that region's needs. It is therefore impossible to analyse or assess the performance of a VET system without examining and understanding the characteristics of the regional innovation system within which it functions.

This study also stems from the idea that two main subsystems can be identified within VET: school-based VET and VET for employment. Both of these must be examined together, given that there are a great many synergies and economies to be inferred from such an examination, as well as from the interaction between the main players in the two subsystems.

These are the two major principles underlying the structure of this study. Chapter 1 provides an introduction and description of methods. The second chapter examines the innovation system within which the VET system functions: the structural constraints at work in the region of La Rioja; its scientific, technological, productive and commercial specialisations; and the challenges the region faces in terms of competition (particularly in the spheres of innovation and training). Chapter 3 details the main characteristics of school-based VET: centres, students, occupational groups, the forms of training provided and the results obtained (completion rates and employment rates). The fourth chapter provides a pioneering and innovative analysis of one dimension of school-based VET: the extent to which the offering meets the needs of the productive sectors. The fifth chapter brings the section on school-based VET to a close with an analysis of the Dual VET model recently implemented in Spain. Next, Chapter 6 provides an analysis of VET for employment, which is subdivided into the VET offered by the government (to employed and unemployed persons) and the VET organised by businesses. Finally, based on the analyses in the previous chapters, Chapter 7 sets out the main conclusions drawn and makes specific recommendations to continue improving the system.

Given that executive summaries should be brief, we will not elaborate on all of these data, the bases of the conclusions reached or the specific details of the recommendations made. The full analyses can be found in chapters 2 to 6; the recommendations are set out in Chapter 7. This executive summary aims to combine the main points of the analyses and recommendations in the following five sections: Competitiveness and specialisation in La Rioja's innovation system; initial VET; the match between supply and demand for VET graduates; Dual VET; and VET for employment.

## **Competitiveness and specialisation**

In relation to the average for EU-28 regions, La Rioja is small in size, has an ageing population, an intermediate level of urbanisation, low potential accessibility and substantial availability of natural resources (particularly agricultural ones). Its businesses are small and it has a low-to-medium level of openness to international trade, a low level of dependence on public administrations, a high level of administrative decentralisation and institutions of above-average quality.

Regarding total employment in the major economic sectors, and in comparison with EU-28 averages, La Rioja's greatest production specialisation (above 140 per cent) is in manufacturing; while its largest subspecialisations (with rates below 66 per cent) are in information and communications, finance, and other advanced market services. The last three sectors mentioned are very knowledge-intensive, displaying growth higher than the average for the economy as a whole and having a significant impact on the competitiveness of the rest of the economy.

The sectors in which the region reports most exports and in which its comparative strengths are greatest are as follows: food and drink; leather and footwear; wood and furniture; and rubber and plastics. Aeronautics and non-metal industries (glass and cement) are less significant but still report positive relative trade balances. In contrast, activities with negative specialisation rates or trade balances include farming and fishing; the motor vehicle industry; electrical supplies and equipment; computing and electronic products; and the chemicals industry.

In general, the productive sectors with the greatest weight in La Rioja, or those in which the region has an advantage, are characterised by low or medium-low levels of technology and demand growth; by producing consumer goods and, to a lesser extent, intermediate goods; and by being intensive in their use of natural resources and labour. However, in recent years, the sectors with medium-high and high levels of technology and demand growth; those producing capital and intermediate goods; and those in which science, technology and differentiation are employed intensively have grown in importance.

The Rioja Media district (which accounts for about two thirds of employment in the autonomous community) specialises in services, motor vehicles and metals

and metal products. The Rioja Baja district specialises in farming and industry (particularly leather and footwear). Farming, drinks and wood and furniture are the main specialisations in the Rioja Alta district.

On general competitiveness, La Rioja rates somewhat above the average among Spain's autonomous communities, while it is slightly below the average for EU-28 regions and lags further behind the reference regions identified for La Rioja. As regards performance indicators (particularly at-risk-of-poverty rates), La Rioja's most recent results are its best. Its biggest weaknesses can be found in the factors determining competitiveness that are most highly dependent on businesses and most closely linked to innovation. These include publications, patents, R&D expenditure, human resources in science and technology, and employment in knowledge-intensive services. Absolute values in many competitiveness indicators have improved in recent years in the region. However, the relative improvement has been small, given that Spain's other regions have also experienced an improvement in these absolute values.

As is the case in Spain as a whole, training profiles in La Rioja are highly polarised, with intermediate education accounting for a low proportion of the total. But perhaps its most significant feature is the high — and climbing — rating given to La Rioja in the European Skill Index's over-qualification indicator.

This phenomenon seems more likely to be linked to demand factors (a lack of occupations requiring highly qualified workers) than to supply (a population with exceptionally high levels of education). This reading is backed up by the fact that the percentage of the working population in possession of university qualifications is lower in La Rioja than in Spain as a whole, while the percentage holding VET qualifications is higher than the national average. Another indicator that suggests that the productive system is not making full use of the population's existing skills is that while education levels in La Rioja are somewhat above the average for Spain's working-age population, education levels among the region's working population are below the national average.

## **Initial vocational education and training**

The initial vocational education and training (IVET) system's composition and functioning are fairly well aligned with the level of demand for professional profiles generated by the productive system in La Rioja, as well as with the region's structural features (detailed in the previous section).

- As highlighted above, the percentage of the population of La Rioja with VET qualifications is higher than the national average. Moreover, during the financial crisis, the number of students enrolled in La Rioja's VET system increased faster than the national average.

- Likewise, despite the region's small size, its system has succeeded in offering a wide range of occupational groups and courses, placing a greater emphasis than Spain as a whole on occupational groups linked to industry. These characteristics are all in line with the industrial specialisation of the region's economy.
- In an area with low population density and geographically unequal concentration of population and economic activity, the system has managed to maintain a relatively well distributed network of VET centres.
- The level of technical skills of its graduates has thus far been considered sufficient by the region's businesses.

In short, there are no signs that the IVET system has been a source of concern or hindrance to the normal functioning of the productive system and innovation in La Rioja to date. Nevertheless, there are several factors that suggest that what may have been sufficient or acceptable in the past will not continue to be so in the future. La Rioja's productive and innovation systems are at a crossroads, and in need of transformation. In this context, the VET system can play a key role in the change of model, or reinvention of it, that La Rioja needs to undergo.

There are three demographic factors experiencing clear changes that will have an even greater impact in the future and which make it necessary to redesign the VET system in La Rioja. The first of these is an ageing population that will make it essential for VET centres to consider not only operating in IVET but also providing lifelong learning (which, within VET, mainly takes the specific form of VET for employment). Secondly, the increasingly visible, natural inclusion of women in the labour market requires VET to make more decisive advances in its 'feminisation' and, above all, in the inclusion of women on courses in the more industrial occupational groups. The third factor is rising depopulation in rural areas, which cries out for the implementation or reinforcement of mechanisms (such as distance VET) that can respond to processes of this kind, as well as to the training needs of the population that decides to remain in rural areas.

As we will see later in this study, in relation to the first of these factors La Rioja's centres are very far behind — even compared to neighbouring autonomous communities — in the provision of VET for employment. A drastic change is required in the model of VET centre found in La Rioja, along with an increase in the number of integrated VET centres to address this situation. This not only requires significant legal and organisational changes but also an increase in the resources available to centres, something that should be considered a pressing need as opposed to a possible option. The challenge of 'feminising' VET is one the region shares with the rest of Spain's autonomous communities, and the measures required include placing much greater emphasis than in the past on communication and vocational guidance mechanisms (see Recommendations in Chapter 7). La Rioja has made great efforts to formulate potential responses to

lower population density and levels of economic activity in certain areas, and is comparatively advanced in its development of distance VET. However, given the magnitude of the challenges faced by such a small autonomous community, it seems obvious that the solution must address the issue in collaboration with neighbouring autonomous communities.

The combination of technological change and internationalisation — along with changing consumer behaviours deriving from demographic shifts — will bring about far-reaching alterations both to the relative weights of the range of sectors and economic activities and to the skills and qualifications required by the various activities until now. The first of these issues will be dealt with later in this study, although we can say for now that all forecasts point towards a diminishing importance of La Rioja's traditional core sectors. Thus, La Rioja must strongly encourage new activities that will in the main be linked to advanced knowledge services. As for the changing profiles and skills required by existing sectors, there is a very broad consensus on the following points: (i) the surviving occupations will require higher levels of qualification; (ii) information and communications technology (ICT) skills will be of vital importance within the future range of skills required; (iii) and cross-cutting skills will be at least as important as technical skills.

The higher level of qualifications required by the occupations of the future mean that La Rioja will have to make a firmer commitment to higher vocational education and training (HVET) qualifications, in particular in industrial occupational groups. On ICT skills, the challenge will lie not so much in promoting IT and communications courses as in developing ICT skills in students on all course types, and examining the implications of Industry 4.0 for all occupational groups. While the interaction between VET centres and businesses (and business associations) has taken a great leap forward with the courses that have started to be taught in Dual format, allowing students to develop skills more in line with the needs of the productive sectors, the level of such interaction in all other course types is manifestly lacking, something which again points to a change in centre model. Lastly, the development of cross-cutting skills to a large extent involves a far-reaching change in learning methods so that collaborative learning based on projects or challenges can become widespread, as is happening in the analogous process in VET in the Basque Country.

Propelling such changes will certainly require resources. Converting a standard VET centre into an integrated centre, implementing HVET courses and incorporating collaborative, project-based learning methods are all costly measures. But all strategies involve sacrifices or costs, and the regional government must understand that if it truly wishes to change its production model, the transformation of its VET system is entirely necessary, and comes at a price. Additionally, all of the economic studies demonstrate that government investment in education is one of the most cost-effective budget items (Aghion et al., 2008). In a region such as La Rioja, whose



business fabric mainly comprises small enterprises — which are known to have trouble keeping up with changing knowledge and technology requirements — the VET model must focus principally on school-based education. The school system must be up-to-date and provide a mechanism for disseminating this knowledge and technology to the small businesses in its area, staying a step ahead of most of these. This calls for investment in teacher training — both on new learning methods and on technical skills and the development of industry experience through placements — and in equipment.

This does not, however, imply an increase in resources for all. Rather, these must be allocated in line with a strategy (both for the VET system in La Rioja as a whole and for the centres receiving resources) and must be results-based; for example, through investment in more equipment for those centres that demonstrate greatest use of their facilities. In this sense, it is necessary to maximise the potential of existing strategies in the autonomous community and its centres that go beyond the mere creation of a plan (especially when such plans are reduced to centres' annual programmes) to incorporate mechanisms to assess the real extent to which objectives are achieved. So, for example, it is necessary to have accurate, complete and timely information on the employment rates for VET graduates, information that can not only be used in the overall planning of the range of qualifications offered, but that also helps centres to assess the extent to which the skills offered match those required by businesses. For example, the data presented in the report on course completion and module passes show that there is considerable room for improvement. VET drop-out rates are very high in Spain, and in La Rioja they are even slightly higher than the national average. The key indicator is not so much the number of students enrolled in VET but the number that successfully complete their courses. Any resources dedicated to identifying and resolving the problems causing these rates would without a doubt yield very significant economic and social returns.

Finally, as one analyst comments on the competitiveness of small businesses in words that also apply to the region and to VET centres in general, their problem is not that they are small, but that they are isolated. Many of the challenges faced by La Rioja's VET system are almost insurmountable if tackled alone, without support and collaboration from neighbouring autonomous communities. For example, the planning of VET courses, while carried out independently, should be performed in coordination with adjacent autonomous communities. It is impossible for La Rioja to develop the right conditions to impart a large number of distance VET courses on its own, since teacher numbers in certain areas are too low for technical courses to be organised there. The same applies to VET centres: it is necessary to encourage them to form associations, whether generally or in strategic groups, in order to achieve the scale required to address certain challenges and also to share what they learn, with more advanced centres training and transferring their experiences to less developed ones.

## Matching supply and demand for VET graduates

Given the existing constraints on the data available, which make it necessary to resort to conjecture, it would be advisable to produce estimates using a variety of methods so as to reach more robust conclusions, adhering to the most consistent or common findings as opposed to relying on the range of approximations available. This is what we have done in this report. Three approaches have been used to assess the match between the supply of VET qualification holders and current demand from the productive system.

- The first — and most innovative and sophisticated — of these is based on the employment currently available in the various sectors, calculating the job opportunities generated both by the net variation in employment and the replacement of workers that abandon an activity. It is then calculated how many of these job opportunities are covered by VET graduates, and it is determined which of the occupational groups they belong to. Finally, by cross-referencing information on all VET graduates (supply) with the occupational groups resulting from the calculations (demand), the degree of coverage provided by the former can be determined.
- The second approach uses data from the overall set of Spanish VET graduates, broken down by occupational group, as a reference to establish whether the VET system in La Rioja is over- or undersupplied in any of the occupational groups.
- The third approach examines data on employment rates for each occupational course and group, with courses resulting in lower employment rates being considered to have an oversupply. The opposite conclusion is reached for those groups and courses achieving greater employment rates.

The following can be surmised from the combination of these approaches:

- While La Rioja has qualification rates above the Spanish average, there currently appears to be a slight undersupply of IVET and HVET graduates, which is much greater if we consider that not all those people that complete a VET qualification enter the labour market.
- Generally, an undersupply can be observed in industrial occupational groups, while there is an overprovision in services (in particular in IT and communications).
- There would seem to be a clear undersupply in occupational groups linked to the farming, footwear and wood industries.
- The food industry is well provided for, while the needs of the metal-working sectors are also generally met to a satisfactory level. Nevertheless, occupational groups such as transport and vehicle maintenance and, to a lesser extent, installation and maintenance and mechanical engineering appear to require greater numbers of graduates. The opposite is true of electricity and electronics.

But it is not enough to focus on the current match of supply to demand. We also need to try to anticipate the future, taking into account the forecasts produced on future employment and job opportunities, as well as net variations in employment due to staff replacement. This process reveals that if the current supply were to be maintained, the mismatch would increase, since apart from the 10-per-cent growth in job numbers predicted between 2018 and 2030 (a rate that is nevertheless lower than the 14 per cent forecast for Spain as a whole), the rate of job replacement would accelerate. This would mean that more than 80 per cent of new job opportunities would be of this type. The lower rate of job creation in La Rioja can be attributed in the main to worsening employment prospects for the farming and industrial sectors. The largest net volumes of new jobs will be created in the commercial sectors. Thus, La Rioja must prepare itself for the shift towards the tertiary sector that will take place within its economy, as well as for significant generational turnover.

Four further observations must be made before we close this section. Firstly, this quantitative approach to the whole set of sectors should be considered a starting point only. The approach must be refined using more qualitative assessments based on expert knowledge, as well as studies focusing more on certain occupational groups or sectors in which these problems have been detected or which are of particular importance in La Rioja in order to attempt to confirm the first conclusions set out in this document.

It must also be commented that while occupational groups provide an initial sphere for the observation of mismatches in supply and demand, analysis must be carried out by educational level, identifying mismatches in IVET and HVET, and by course (within each occupational group). For example, employment rates show that within the occupational groups affected by an oversupply, there are certain courses that have very high employment rates (and are therefore undersupplied, in principle) and vice versa.

Although analysis of the match between supply and demand has focused on graduates from VET courses, it is worth considering that mismatches can also be corrected through training and qualifications stemming from VET for employment; for example, through unemployed people gaining professional certification linked to the occupational group that is undersupplied. This is also a response that could prove faster and less expensive than starting up a new training programme.

Finally, correcting a mismatch between supply and demand requires more than varying the number of places available on certain courses. Sometimes, training programmes are offered but young people and their families do not find them attractive. Not enough people enrol and the courses cannot be imparted — or they are imparted with fewer students than required. One key component of policies to match supply and demand is communication and vocational guidance.

## Dual VET

Recent Spanish legislation on Dual VET is so ambiguous and incoherent that each autonomous community has gradually constructed its own model. What specific characteristics does the Dual VET model have in La Rioja?

- Although La Rioja has a school-based model of Dual VET (as in most of Spain's autonomous communities), the region's model is characterised by greater involvement on the part of businesses in the implementation and development of Dual VET. Businesses have a role in many of the initiatives to create new training courses and in the increased hours of training given, and are also more involved in the assessment and selection of students.
- In La Rioja, the Dual groups are separate and Dual VET students do not share classes with students following a traditional model of training. This report makes reference to various factors that suggest it would be advisable to make the shift to mixed groups.
- All students are paid, albeit in the form of a grant as opposed to an employment contract. The provision of training and apprenticeship contracts should be fostered, although it would be advisable for the government to establish a new contract type for Dual VET covering the specific needs and characteristics of Dual VET, such as expanding its application to younger students.
- Supporting this type of VET is very costly for the government of La Rioja: Dual VET groups are small (approximately 12 students as opposed to 30 on traditional courses); the government meets a large proportion of the cost of student grants (although the level of co-funding is decreasing); and teachers are paid for the hours that students spend in businesses.
- With the aim of assuring higher quality and more sustainable Dual VET, lower growth in student numbers in comparison with the Spanish average has been favoured in La Rioja. As a result, the percentage of VET students that follow the dual model is somewhat lower in La Rioja (2.3 per cent) than in Spain as a whole (3 per cent). It would be recommendable to encourage new measures to increase the as-yet low percentage of students in Dual VET in the region, as described in further detail in Chapter 5. To achieve this, it is necessary to remedy the lack of information and the misinformed perceptions that exist among businesses not involved in Dual VET. This will require ensuring government and associated entities take Dual VET students and encouraging social partners to include this formula within collective bargaining. Efforts must be made to encourage growth in those spheres where there is a large margin for improvement in comparison with the situation in other autonomous communities (female students, services occupational groups, and so on).

- Dual VET in La Rioja is more concentrated on a small number of occupational groups than in the rest of Spain. Unlike the case nationally, in La Rioja industrial Dual VET predominates, making the proportion of male students in the region's Dual VET system even higher. Similarly, HVET programmes in La Rioja are slightly more concentrated proportionally in private centres and the autonomous community's capital city.
- There is a significant presence of small businesses, enabled by the organisational role played by sectoral associations and by an initiative that encourages students to spend time at various small businesses during the course of their training. Meanwhile, given this small business size, it is more necessary than ever to create mechanisms that ensure the training provided by these businesses genuinely is of good quality, achieved by means of business accreditation, training of trainers and tutors, creation of a central registry of collaborating businesses, and so on.
- Finally, to encourage growth of the currently insufficient number of centres offering this type of VET, it is also necessary to correct the misconceptions — such as that Dual VET can lead to a reduction in the teaching hours recognised, or that businesses are not capable of training apprentices properly — that exist in some centres (above all those that do not provide this type of training, e.g. public centres that focus on services). It is also important to establish points of contact between centres that do provide Dual VET and those that do not, since the former can share their positive experiences with the latter, providing information and reaffirming the pledges already made on this issue.

## **VET for employment**

The well-known fragmentation of the VET system is particularly serious in the sphere of VET for employment. In La Rioja, the fact that the general directorates of both employment and education belong to the same regional government department favours coordination between the two. Nevertheless, the scarce number of integrated VET centres and the fact that the only national reference centre in La Rioja is under the auspices of a different regional government department has made joint actions more difficult.

In 2017, the indicator on participation among the population aged 25 to 64 in lifelong learning activities — which is available for all European regions and covers all types of VET — placed La Rioja on a par with the Spanish average and slightly below the EU-28 average. Spain had already fallen behind the EU-28 on this indicator between 2014 and 2017, and La Rioja was the autonomous community where this decline was greatest.

This downturn and the low level of VET for employment offered by government to unemployed and employed alike has been influenced in recent years by factors both specific to the autonomous community and external to it: the fund allocation

criteria applied by the Sectoral Committee on Employment and Labour Affairs; the improper application of the principle of competitive tendering in certain spheres of VET for employment; the exclusion of social partners as direct providers of VET for employment by Law 35/2015; the application of the principles of cost efficiency and the withdrawal of advance funding for suppliers to cover training costs; an excessive linkage of VET for employment to the professional certificates and training specialisations listed in the national catalogue; the changes in the kinds of evidence required to gain grant funding for training activities; the failure to apply the module systems to the management of VET for employment in La Rioja; and the repeated changes in the bodies and organisational structures responsible for VET for employment in the Government of La Rioja.

As a consequence of the above, a total of just 1.7 per cent of unemployed people took part in VET for employment in La Rioja in 2017. This compared poorly to the 5 per cent participation in Spain as a whole and was nowhere near the 20 per cent target set by the CEOE (Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organisations). The decline in the VET for employment available to those in work was even greater, to the extent that in 2017 no calls for applications were published. Moreover, the VET for employment offered in La Rioja was concentrated in cross-cutting or generic areas, even more so than in Spain as a whole, with a negligible proportion being assigned to industrial or advanced ICT occupational groups.

In the future, the VET for employment offered must meet the challenge of increasing the percentage of unemployed people covered by training activities, particularly taking into account that the long-term unemployed are characterised by very low levels of qualification. The main challenge for VET for employment aimed at those in work is to recover the previous level of activity. There are positive indications that change is under way (such as in the publication in 2019 of ministerial orders on the catalogue of training specialisations, the resumed publication of calls for applications for VET for employment, the shift to multiannual programming of training activities, the use of finance modules, the promotion of employment contracts, and so on).

In the VET for employment programmes designed by businesses, which exceed the VET for employment offered by government both in terms of the funding allocated to such training and the number of workers reached, the indicators also show that La Rioja lags behind the Spanish average, and that levels of training provided have declined in recent years. Thus, the coverage rate for employee training in La Rioja (17 per cent, according to data produced by the Fundae foundation) is almost half the Spanish average (32 per cent), and is the second-lowest among all of Spain's autonomous communities. Meanwhile, the training organised by businesses is concentrated in a few occupational groups, while courses developing industrial, engineering and advanced ICT skills are very scarce. A lower level of attention

to training is particularly evident among smaller sized companies and those in traditional services.

A sector providing VET for employment is of vital importance both to the VET for employment offered by the government and that organised by businesses (in particular, SMEs). The capacity of this sector has dwindled in La Rioja over the last decade, even more acutely than in the rest of Spain. The sector is currently very small and concentrated mainly in the Rioja Media district, with minimal participation by VET centres.

Overhauling that sector is a key challenge for La Rioja. It requires more than solving the general problems in VET for employment mentioned above (which may have led to the shrinking of the private sector) and promoting measures such as support for studies into businesses' skills and training needs (which would stimulate demand for VET for employment): VET centres should be assigned a more decisive role in the sector, above all in courses within industrial occupational groups.

This report sets out various measures to increase the role of VET centres in the provision of VET for employment: increasing the number of integrated centres, encouraging VET trainers to spend time in businesses to acquire necessary experience in the areas taught, increasing the number of training activities not linked to professional certificates, using external staff or interim staff to impart courses, and so on. Moreover, alongside the commissions granted for the management of public VET centres, if private centres were to have greater capacity then co-funding schemes could be established to ensure stability, thereby boosting the chances of centres making long-term commitments to developing VET for employment.



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