

AIReF IDENTIFIES AREAS TO IMPROVE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF UNIVERSITY SYSTEM IN CASTILE AND LEON

- **The Independent Authority for Fiscal Responsibility (AIReF) has published a study on the public university system in Castile and Leon, in which it analyses its strategic framework, teaching organisation and research performance**
- **It notes the lack of strategic planning on the part of the regional government and proposes the development of annual strategic plans to serve as a reference for the funding model and the strategic plans of the different universities in the Region**
- **It detects a heightened degree of complexity in the methodologies of the teaching plans of the four universities of Castile and Leon and proposes to improve them by simplifying them and homogenising their content, structure and methodology**
- **It considers that a persistent misalignment exists between the number of places offered on degree programmes and the demand for them and suggests an in-depth review of the imbalances detected and the design of adjustment mechanisms**
- **It notes heterogeneity in the research specialisation of the universities in Castile and Leon and proposes analysing the areas of knowledge of each university that have stood out for their scientific production and promoting the use of their practices in other areas**

The Independent Authority for Fiscal Responsibility (AIReF) published a study on the public university system in Castile and Leon on its website today, which analyses its strategic framework, teaching organisation and research performance. In the study, AIReF observes a lack of strategic planning in prioritising the targets for university education in the Region, a wide heterogeneity and complexity in the methodologies of the teaching organisation plans of the four public universities, a persistent misalignment between the number of places offered and the demand for them and heterogeneity in research specialisation.

In terms of public spending, AIReF evaluates an amount of approximately €454m that the public university system received from the regional government in 2022. AIReF identifies several areas whose improvement would help achieve more efficient use of this public spending.

First, AIReF notes that the regional government does not have the university programming envisaged in the Castile and Leon Universities Act, which entails the absence of a document that establishes strategic planning and prioritises the targets for university education in the region. This conditions the possibility of carrying out a

thorough evaluation of the fulfilment of its targets and leaves both the funding model and the universities without references to draw up their own strategic plans and their subsequent development in the form of strategic projects.

In the exercise of their autonomy, the four universities in Castile and Leon establish in their statutes the drafting of multi-year strategic planning tools. However, these tools do not sufficiently address some fundamental pillars, such as research and teaching. AIReF considers that the universities should take advantage of this governance framework to draw up more proportionate strategic planning with balanced, precise and aligned pillars and targets.

Second, AIReF analyses the teaching organisation plans of the four public universities in Castile and Leon, highlighting the wide heterogeneity and complexity of the methodologies and the lack of association with the strategic planning of the universities. According to AIReF, this heterogeneity makes it difficult for the region to see and compare the reality of teaching capacities and needs. In this regard, AIReF considers that simplifying and standardising the content and methodologies of the plans would improve the alignment of each university's teaching load with the strategic targets and enhance the transparency and comparability of indicators.

Following the homogenisation process carried out by AIReF on the basis of the micro-data on teaching and research staff capacity and teaching assignments for the academic year 2021/2022, this evaluation highlights that the net teaching capacity, after the reductions applied, accounts for 66.5% of the gross capacity. This figure is in line with the result of the data on teaching staff. Heterogeneity between universities can be observed in the accounting of teaching capacity (e.g. types of reductions) and the teaching load (e.g. different group sizes, types of subjects, etc.), making comparison difficult. Lastly, AIReF concludes that there is no clear positive relationship between the size of teaching groups and performance indicators for the same degree of experimentality.

Supply-demand misalignment

Third, AIReF notes a persistent misalignment between the places on offer in the degree courses at the public universities of Castile and Leon and the demand for them by new intake students. This imbalance is common in the Spanish university system, but a greater shortage of places has been found in Castile and Leon, mainly in degrees in the branches of social and legal sciences and health sciences. A higher number of unfilled places was also found in the branches of arts and humanities and engineering and architecture.

Furthermore, it was found that this misalignment between supply and demand for places lasts throughout the period examined, from the academic year 2015/2016 to the academic year 2022/2023. This imbalance has not been corrected by any of the parties involved. On the one hand, the four public universities neither increase nor decrease places in order to converge with the preferences of new intake students. On the other hand, there is evidence of the possible existence of a signalling problem since part of the student demand for degrees, especially in architecture and engineering, does not correspond to the latest employment data observed among the most recent graduates.

Heterogeneity in research specialisation

Fourth, the analysis of scientific output between 2017 and 2021 shows that the research specialisation of the universities of Castile and Leon is heterogeneous. Specifically, AIReF detects that the University of Burgos has a comparative advantage in the production of total and first-quartile publications in history, philosophy and art, mechanical engineering and health specialities. For its part, the University of Leon stands out in architecture, civil engineering, construction and town planning, electrical and telecommunications engineering, mechanical engineering, history, philosophy and art, biomedical sciences and related clinical specialities, and educational sciences. The University of Salamanca has a higher proportion of total and first-quartile publications in business sciences, computer engineering, architecture, civil engineering, construction and town planning, and mathematics. Finally, the University of Valladolid registers a relative specialisation in research in natural sciences, chemical, materials and environmental engineering, and electrical and telecommunications engineering.

Proposals

On the basis of these findings, AIReF makes both general and specific proposals. At a cross-cutting level, it considers it essential for the Regional Government of Castile and Leon to draw up an annual strategic plan to serve as a reference for both the funding model and the strategic plans and implementing regulations of each university. It also recommends establishing a multi-year funding model incorporating homogeneous criteria for analytical accounting, evaluation indicators and structural funding schemes in which funding by targets has a significant weight.

AIReF also proposes a series of improvements to the universities' teaching plans, such as simplifying and standardising their content, structure and methodology, linking teaching capacity loads to strategic planning and progressively decoupling their preparation from the calculation of teaching and recruitment needs.

AIReF also proposes performing an in-depth examination of the imbalances between places offered and places in demand and to design adjustment mechanisms to correct the gap over time, in line with the planning of each university. Lastly, it proposes analysing the areas of knowledge of each university that have stood out in this evaluation for their scientific production and promoting the use of their practices in the rest of the areas.