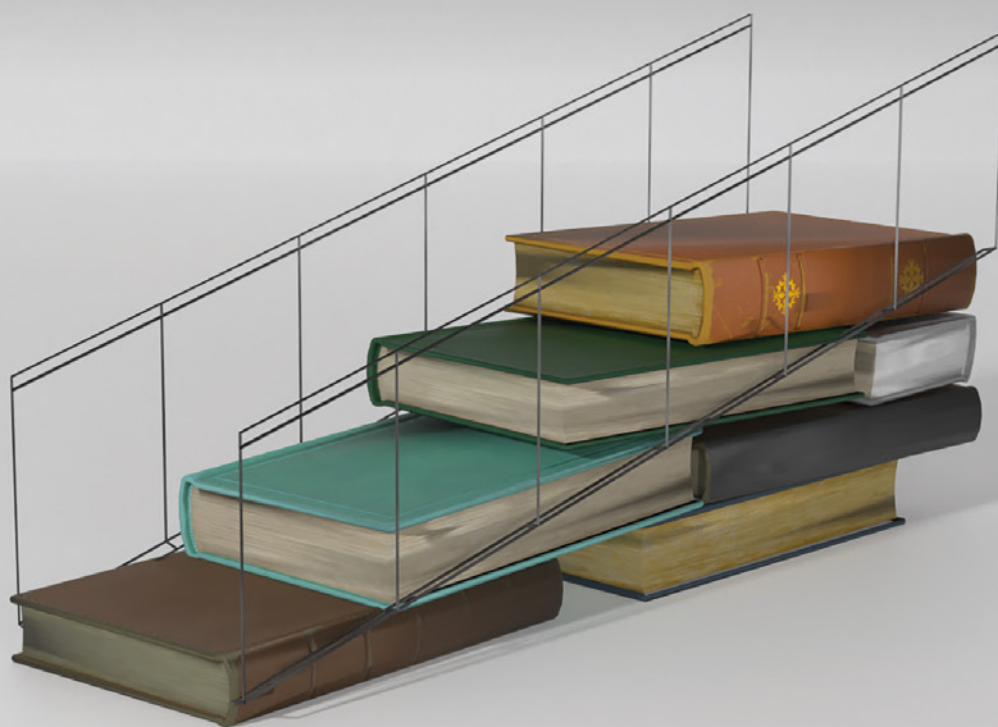


# *Education and its impact on young people's opportunities*

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*Using two key indicators (early school leaving and educational levels obtained by young people), the evolution of young people's educational paths in Portugal and Spain is interpreted. Based on comparative data from Eurostat and the OECD, the figures explore the impact of the education levels achieved, both on the employment opportunities of the young adult population in Portugal and in Spain and on their participation in social, community, cultural, sporting, and artistic life.*

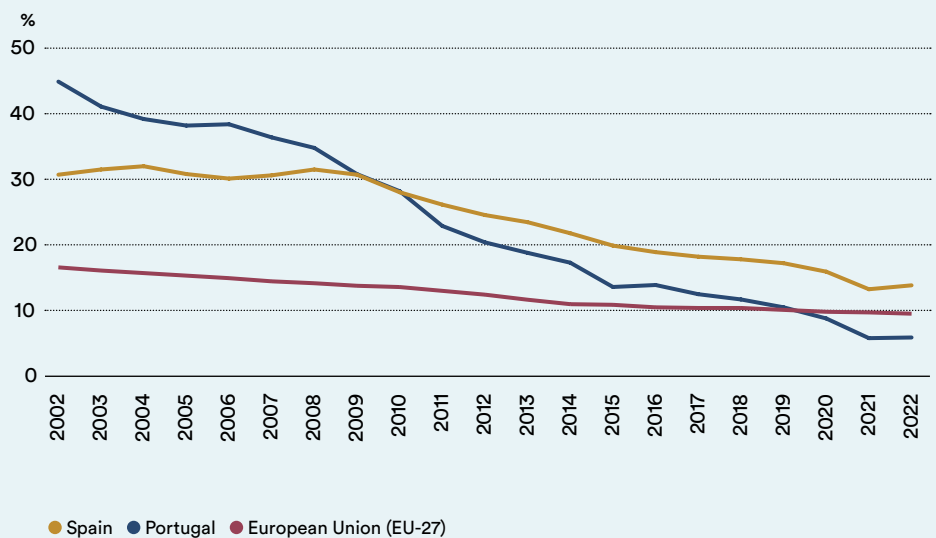


### How far has early school leaving been reduced?

The proportion of young people aged between 18 and 24 years who have not completed upper secondary education (*bachillerato* or *formación profesional* in Spain; *ensino secundário* or *dupla certificação*, level 3-4, in Portugal) and are not enrolled in any education or training programmes has been a key indicator of educational development at European level, not least because it is measured using a common instrument (Labour Force Survey, Eurostat). As can be seen in figure 1, the evolution of this indicator over the last twenty years has been positive, but at very different

speeds: slow at European level, moderate in Spain and high in Portugal. The progress observed in the latter country, which exceeds even the European average, is still more remarkable if we take into account that, between 1992 and 2002, the percentage had only fallen from 50% to 45%, while in Spain it fell from 40% to 31%. It could be thought that this trend would be associated with a lack of job opportunities, but the percentage of young people with jobs in Portugal (30%) is also higher than in Spain (26%), a country that stands out for its high rate of young people who neither study nor work (20% in 2021).

Figure 1  
**Young people (18-24 years) who have not completed upper secondary education and are not in education or training, 2002-2022**



*Early school leaving in Spain and Portugal has come close to the European average*

Source: compiled by the authors based on data from Eurostat (Labour Force Survey).

The fight against early school leaving has been a European priority for boosting both economic growth and social cohesion. This requires long-term consistency between education, labour, and social policies, and between local or municipal, regional, national, and European levels (European Commission, 2014). In this sense, individualised support and guidance for young people play a key role in connecting different sectors and levels (Psifidou et al., 2021). The Portuguese case reflects this coordination, with integrated programmes for social inclusion, educational quality, and professional qualifications, as it promotes networking between schools and a wide range of community organisations (Álvares et al., 2017).

In Spain, despite evident advances, research has observed more difficulties, with significant variations between regions, both in turning schools into more inclusive, open, and innovative spaces, and in the integrated development of educational, social and community policies that contribute to effectively combating the interconnected phenomena of school failure and early school leaving (Garrido et al., 2020; Martínez et al., 2016).

### Risks of polarisation among young people by qualification levels and areas

If we take a closer look at the educational level of the young adult population (aged 25 to 29 years) in Portugal, we can confirm that there have been

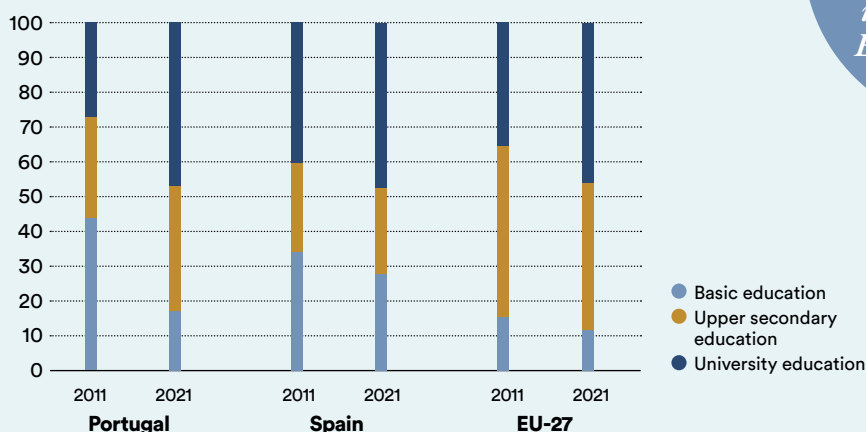
very positive developments over the last decade, especially in secondary level qualifications, with over 40% of these now corresponding to vocational qualifications. On the other hand, the progress observed in Spain for this period and age group is concentrated in higher education

*Studies have shown that those who attain higher qualifications continue to achieve higher employment rates than those who only achieve a baccalaureate-level qualification*

qualifications, which are now held by almost half of young people, a percentage that is even higher than the European average. Despite these advances, both countries are characterised, within the European framework, by marked educational inequalities, i.e. high rates of young people with high qualifications and low qualifications (figure 2), which poses risks of segregation and social polarisation.

The diversification of post-compulsory secondary education provision, especially with the development of a strong vocational training system, has mobilized strong investments in both

Figure 2  
Educational attainment of young people (25 to 34 years) in Portugal, Spain, and the EU-22 in 2011 and 2021



Source: compiled by the authors based on data from the OECD (*Education at a Glance*, 2022).

*The polarisation of qualifications among young people in Portugal and Spain is higher than the European average*

Note: “University education” refers to all higher education qualifications (ISCED 5-8), awarded by universities or polytechnics; “Upper secondary education” refers to all intermediate level baccalaureate or vocational education and training qualifications (ISCED 3-4); “Basic education” refers to lower levels of education (ISCED 0-2).

countries. Although other European systems with a long tradition and recognition are a central reference in this field, studies have pointed out the importance of these policies taking into account the economic and cultural singularities of each country and even of each region, to ensure that these trajectories are valued both in academic and professional terms. In addition, research conducted in Portugal has shown that while many teachers and students value the more practical and work-oriented nature of this type of education, social, cultural and ethnoracial biases exist associated with a duality between academic and vocational secondary education pathways (Abrantes & Roldão, 2019).

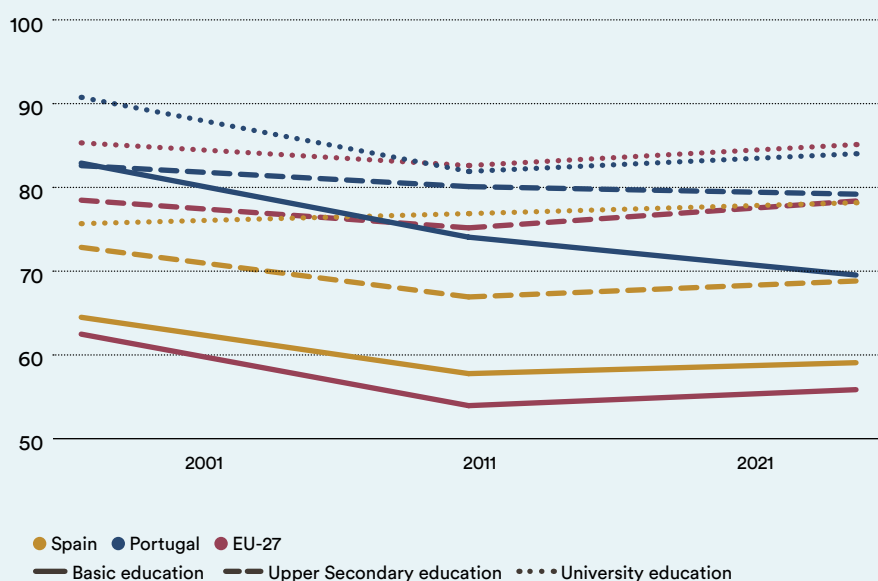
### Education continues to impact young people's employment opportunities

In the court of public opinion, in Portugal and Spain alike, the reduction in early school leaving and the massification of secondary and higher education qualifications have often raised doubts about the value of this education for the opportunities of the young population, particularly in the jobs market. Even so, following a pattern common in Europe, those who attain higher qualifications continue to achieve higher employment rates than those who only achieve a baccalaureate-level qualification, while young people with a low level of schooling have the most difficulties in securing a job (figure 3). Over the last two decades, youth employment

rates have decreased in Portugal and increased in Spain, converging in both countries with the European average. However, inequality between young people with high and low qualifications has increased in both cases (and in the European area as a whole).

It is true that research studies have shown an intensification of employment precarity among young people, aggravated by austerity policies, as well as a “brain drain” from the Iberian Peninsula towards other latitudes (Tavares et al., 2021). Qualitative studies of a biographical type reveal how these situations lead to difficulties in leaving the parental home, finding a partner, or having children (Casal et al., 2011), leading to sinuous and uncertain life pathways, which in turn means consequences for birth rates and the ageing of the population. Even so, these generational trends are not exempt from profound social and educational inequalities, accentuated by the polarisation of labour markets, which includes the valuation of specific skills together with the devaluation of work considered “not specialised”. One must also take into account that, especially in Portugal, research has highlighted the education system's inefficacy in reducing social inequalities, with a strengthening of the affinity between the school world and the most disadvantaged social classes, i.e. school does not seem to open up new social and cultural possibilities, but rather reinforces the expectations and aspirations of children from the

Figure 3  
**Employment rate of young people aged between 25 and 34 years old, by education level**



*Higher education continues to have a positive impact on access to the labour market in Portugal and Spain*

Source: compiled by the authors based on data from Eurostat (Labour Force Survey).

popular classes (Martins, 2012). Although qualifications have a positive effect on employability, their impact is limited, as high or specialised qualifications often do not guarantee remuneration on a par with expectations (Lopes et al., 2019), a remuneration that is, in any case, lower than that earned in the countries of the north or centre of the European Union.

### More sociability than citizenship activities? Education and social participation

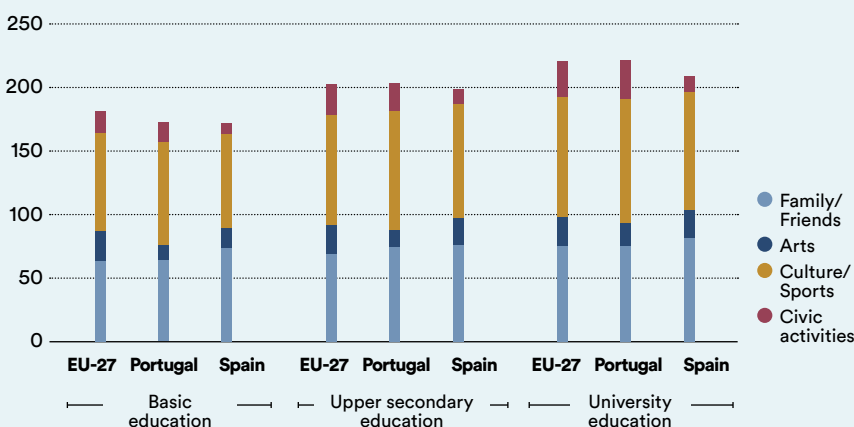
Since education and work do not exhaust the dimensions in which young people build their lives, it is also worth considering the impact that education has on other social spheres and on levels of citizen participation. The idea is often expressed that young people are disengaged in politics, but very active in the field of leisure and social life, for example. But is this really the case? According to Eurostat data (figure 4), participation is actually much higher in cultural and sports activities, as well as in family and friendship relationships, with relatively low figures for citizen participation (in formal and informal organisations) and artistic activities. These patterns are common all over Europe but are especially pronounced in Portugal and Spain. Even so, the data also show persistent – and marked, in the case of the Iberian Peninsula – inequalities, with participation rates in the various dimensions being higher among young people with higher qualifications, compared to those with lower educational levels.

In percentage terms, the participation of the young population in civic, cultural, and sporting activities in Portugal and Spain is relatively low, especially when considering young people with low qualifications. However, we know that the most socially disadvantaged young people, particularly in the peripheral social spaces of the major cities of the Iberian Peninsula, do actively participate in activities of this nature.

*It will be important to consolidate youth policies that articulate the different dimensions in which young people often move in an unpredictable and non-linear way*

We are talking about informal spaces for building citizenship and participation in the public sphere with the development of various creative dynamics, as we can see in the Iberian vitality of urban cultures linked especially to graffiti, street art and parkour, rap, and new musical genres such as reggaeton or kuduro, among other forms of social, cultural, sporting, and artistic participation. However, it is important to note that, in Portugal and Spain, females participate much less in these activities than males, and they

Figure 4  
Participation of young people in civic, cultural, sporting, artistic, and community activities, according to their level of education (cumulative %)



*Education continues to influence many dimensions of young people's lives*

Note: "University education" refers to all higher education qualifications (ISCED 5-8), awarded by universities or polytechnics; "Upper secondary education" refers to all intermediate level baccalaureate or vocational education and training qualifications (ISCED 3-4); "Basic education" refers to lower levels of education (ISCED 0-2).

Source: compiled by the authors based on data from Eurostat (2015)

are often completely absent. The access of lower qualified and socially disadvantaged young people to the public sphere continues to be marked by very significant gender differences.

### Conclusions

As we have seen over the course of this article, education continues to be a fundamental factor, not only for the labour market integration and development of young people, but also for their opportunities for social, cultural, sporting, and community participation. In this sense, Portugal and Spain have seen significant progress in educational convergence with the values observed in the rest of the European Union. However, there is still a large percentage of young people who leave the education system without obtaining a post-compulsory secondary qualification, and that these young people today face situations of vulnerability and risk of exclusion that are more pronounced than in the past. In addition, the age variable is joined by others such as social class, gender, or territorial origin in complex intersectional articulations with specific consequences. Young people in the Iberian Peninsula tend to participate socially and be involved in cultural and creative activities, especially in informal and street contexts, revealing a search for spaces that are freer from structures and hierarchies. Even so, several studies indicate that young women are relatively absent from these activities.

In this sense, it will be important to consolidate youth policies that articulate the different dimensions (educational, work, family, civic, sporting, artistic) in which young people often move in an unpredictable and non-linear way. Expansion of educational levels is essential for their integration, but it needs to value and open doors for young people in other spheres of social life, not keep them away. Furthermore, it is important to construct solutions in which inequalities can be mitigated, paying special attention to young people neither employed nor enrolled in formal studies, taking into account that a large percentage also suffer from a lack of resources and opportunities at the family, civic, cultural, or community level. This group must be prioritized by public policies rooted in solid quantitative and qualitative scientific knowledge, and developed through co-creation processes in which young people play a truly active role.

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