

The Landscape of Higher Education in the Canary Islands: A Comparative Analysis with European Union Countries

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Abstract:

This study presents an overview of the higher education landscape of the Canary Islands and draws comparisons with other countries in the European Union. It outlines the historical evolution, funding structures, and academic programs of the region's key public and private universities. It also highlights the Canary Islands' commitment to innovation, research, and sustainable development. The study analyses student demographics, enrolment trends and the impact of EU membership on intercultural and educational exchange. The results show the challenges and opportunities the Canary Islands are facing in maintaining high educational standards, attracting foreign students, and creating a dynamic, stimulating environment for local and foreign learners.

Keywords: Higher education, Canary Islands, Innovation, Student demographics, EU membership impact on Education.

Introduction

In developing societies, it is becoming obvious that a higher level of education of individuals is their most valuable and important asset. This is even more important in islands as this could be the best path to a future based on prosperity and quality of life in a developing society. Higher education institutions in the Canary Islands have historically developed to reflect a clear merger of local needs and cultural influences. The geographic position of the Canary Islands has represented and shaped the academic environment. Thus, outstanding research has been carried out in the fields of marine sciences, renewable energy and tourism, research involving students and researchers from across Europe. The islands' commitment to sustainable development is evident in the emphasis and dedication they show to research and innovation in these fields, reinforcing their cultural identity as pioneers in environmental sustainability.

With certain regional variations, the Canary Islands' educational system is essentially the same as that of mainland Spain. Higher education is essential for promoting academic excellence and improving the quality of life. Thus, the foundations of higher education in the region have been laid since 1792, when the University of La Laguna was established. The institution has developed over the centuries and has become an important centre of the intellectual and cultural life of the Canary Islands, expanding its scope and innovation in research. To meet the needs for specialised and technical training, the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria was founded in 1989, significantly developing, and diversifying the higher education in the archipelago offered to students. Although spending on education in relation to GDP has decreased, the region's commitment to maintaining high educational standards is evident. This is proven by the reputation of the region within the European educational framework, where its commitment to inclusive education and its adaptability to the diverse needs of its students is constantly demonstrated. The Canary Islands strive to make a significant contribution to the overall objectives of European excellence in education and research by promoting international cooperation and providing a rich cultural and academic environment.

Higher Education in the Canary Islands

In the Canary Islands, higher education funding is mainly supported by a combination of public and private sources. Private universities rely on tuition fees and private investment, while public universities receive significant funding from the regional government. Ensuring the fulfilment of academic goals and regional development objectives of academic institutions is achieved through a combination of governance arrangements, thus regional government oversight works together with university administration.

Tertiary education in the Canary Islands follows the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) framework for the academic system, thus offering different bachelor, master, and doctoral programs. In order to improve employability, student skills development and various economic indicators, universities in the region place particular emphasis on blending academic and practical learning. Therefore, the universities have various close partnerships with organisations and research institutes, but also with local or related businesses in the European Union.

The University of La Laguna (ULL) and the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC) are the only and most important public universities in the Canary Islands. The ULL, based in San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Tenerife, is known for its humanities and sciences offers and seems similar to "research-led" universities in other continental European countries (Duke et al., 2006). ULPGC, based in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, is known for its focus on innovation and technology. In addition, three other private institutions have been established in the last twelve years: Universidad del Atlántico Medio was established in 2015, Universidad Europea de Canarias was set up in 2012, and Universidad Fernando Pessoa-Canarias (UFP-C) was established in 2014. These universities offer diverse opportunities to students, placing emphasis as Universidad Fernando Pessoa-Canarias (UFP-C) on the excellent value of individual education and social engagement, Universidad del Atlántico Medio, focuses on innovation and professional development, and Universidad Europea de Canarias offers a variety of undergraduate degrees and postgraduate programs with a focus on internationalisation and employability.

According to Canarias Datos Abiertos, there are several university centres in the Canary Islands that are affiliated to the five main universities (Figure 1).

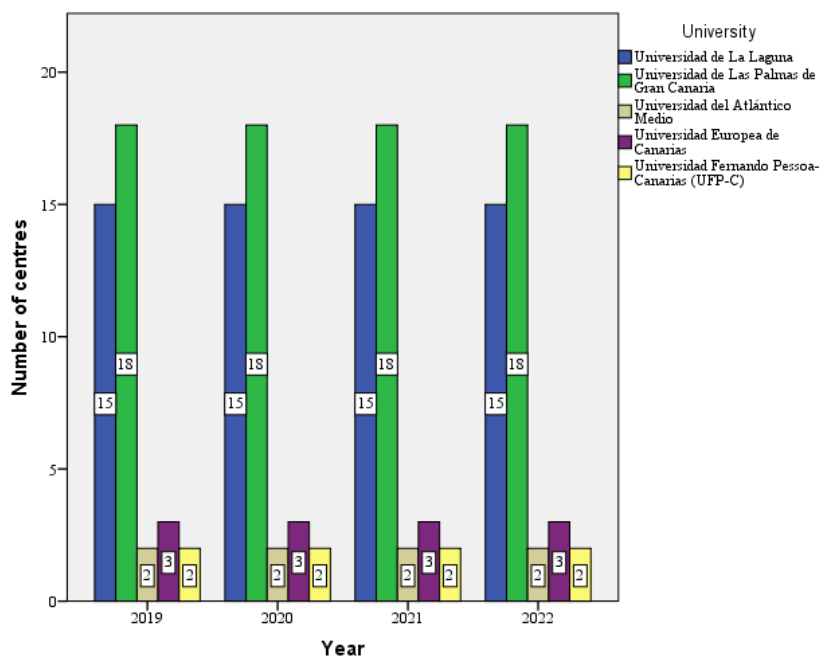


Figure 1. Number of university centres between 2019 and 2022

Source: Author's production

From 2019 to 2022, all five universities had a constant number of affiliated centres. The University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC) has the highest number of centres in the Canary Islands, with a total of eighteen centres.

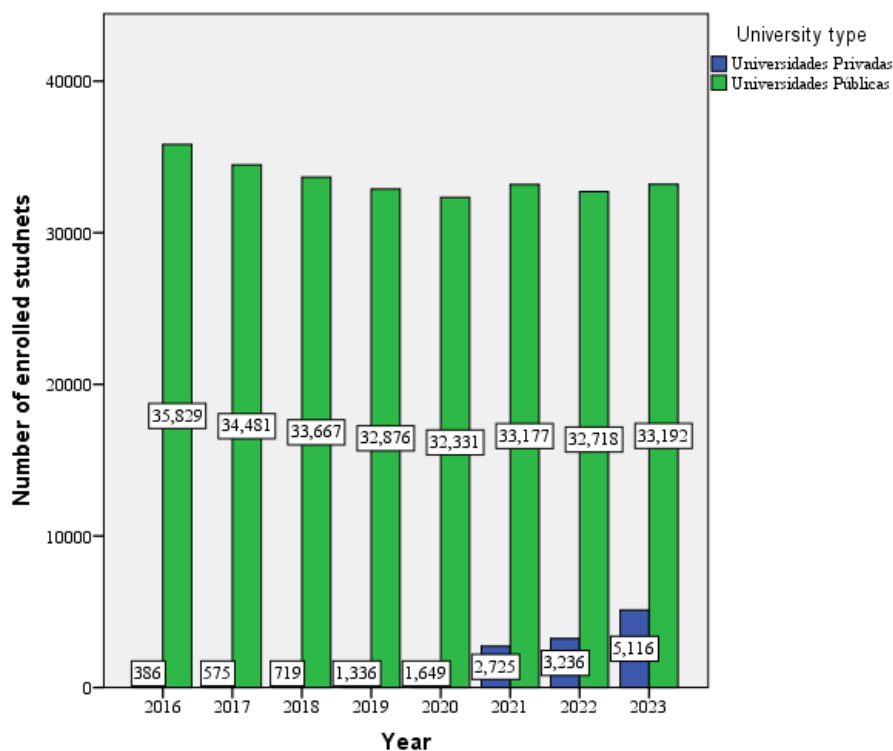


Figure2: Number of enrolments per university type between 2016 and 2023
Source: Author’s production

Figure 2 illustrates that most students prefer attending public universities, as supported by the data.

The data presented in the figure above indicates that private universities have an increased trend regarding enrolments over the last 3 years, reaching 5116 students in 2023. Public universities registered a decline trend in enrolment from 2016 to 2020, when they reached their lowest enrolment of 32331 students. After the pandemic, enrolment began to recover, and from 2021, the trend showed an upturn, reaching 33192 students in 2023.

The number of enrolments for economic studies was also analysed over the past five years, categorised by field of study (Figure 3).

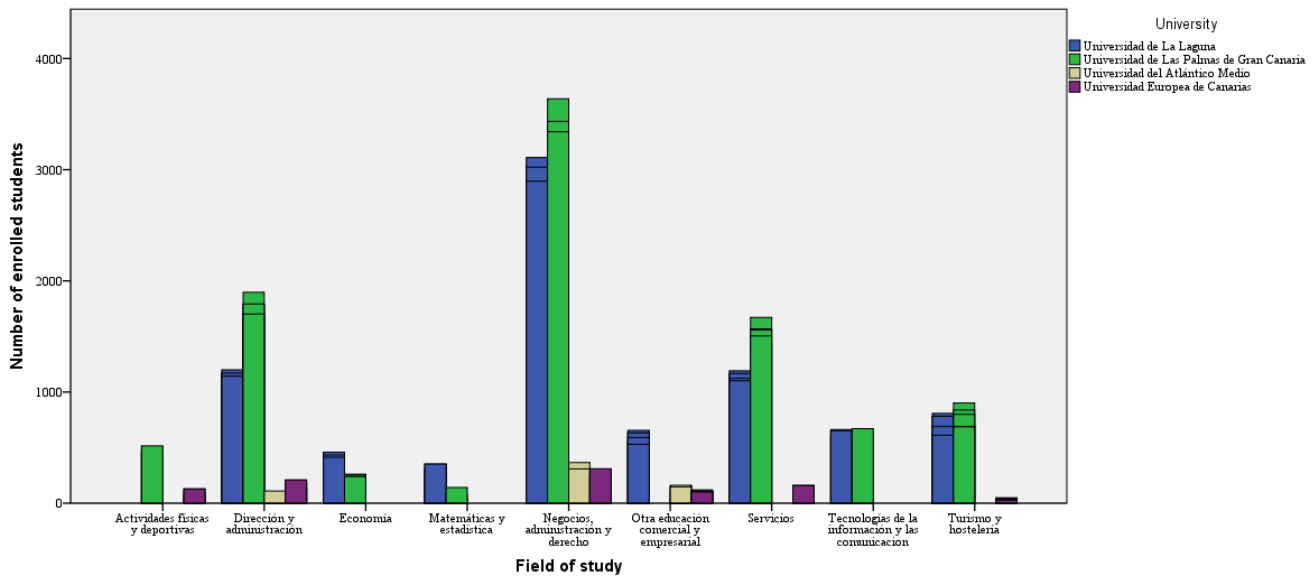


Figure 3: Number of enrolments per university and field of study

Source: Author's production

Most students choose to study Business, administration and law, Management and administration, Services, or Tourism and hospitality. According to the graph above, for the data provided by Canarias Datos Abiertos, the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and the University of La Laguna are the most popular choices for these topics.

Many students have graduated from public universities, but since 2021 students have also begun to trust, enrol in, and graduate from private universities (Figure 4).

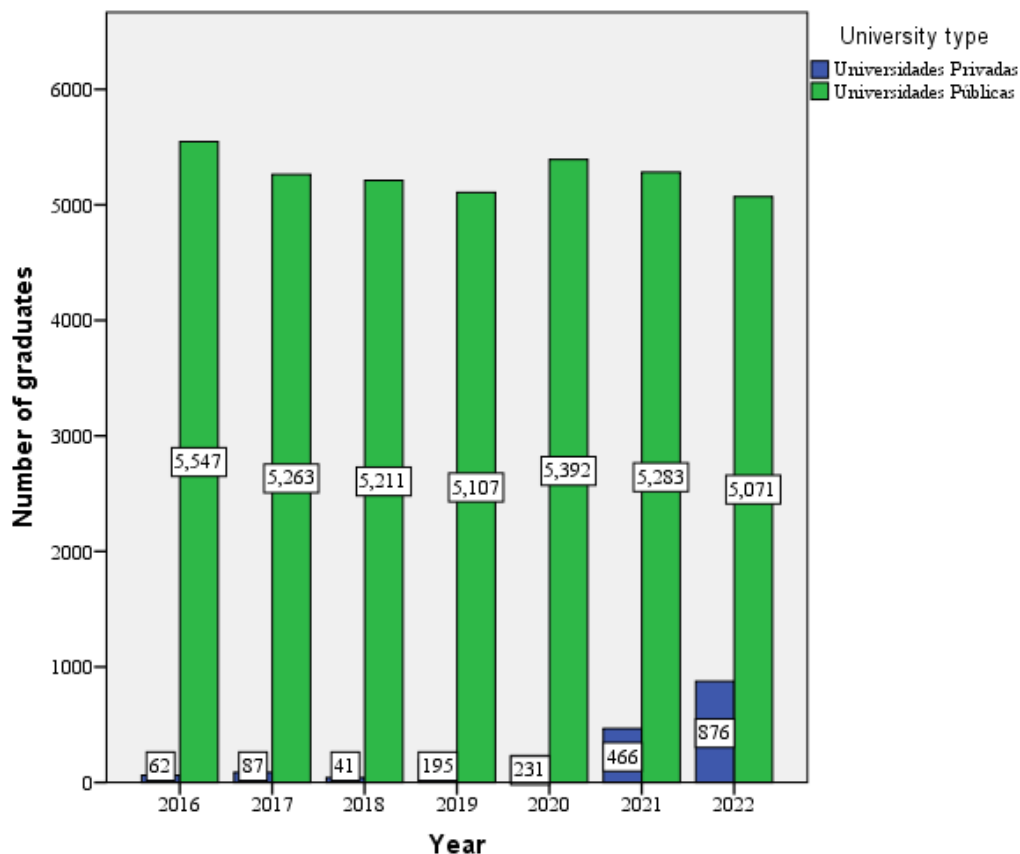


Figure 4. Graduates from university type between 2016 and 2022
Source: Author's production

As the above figure indicates, public universities had a constant number of graduates over the years, except a noticeable drop in 2022, when it reached 5071 graduates, the lowest number since 2016. Also, it can be noticed that, even though in 2020 the pandemic effects affected most economic activities, public universities had the highest number of graduates since 2016, which can indicate that students focused more on academic activities and tried to complete their studies. Private universities are also gaining a considerable number of graduates since 2020, doubling their number of graduates to 876 in 2021 and 2022.

The number of official degrees awarded by each of the five universities – ULL, ULPGC, UEC, UPF-C and UNIDAM – is compared in Figure 5. The only universities awarding doctoral degrees are ULL and ULPGC, which also hold the record for awarding the most degrees at any level. Compared to ULL and ULPGC, UEC, UPF-C and UNIDAM have a much lower rank.

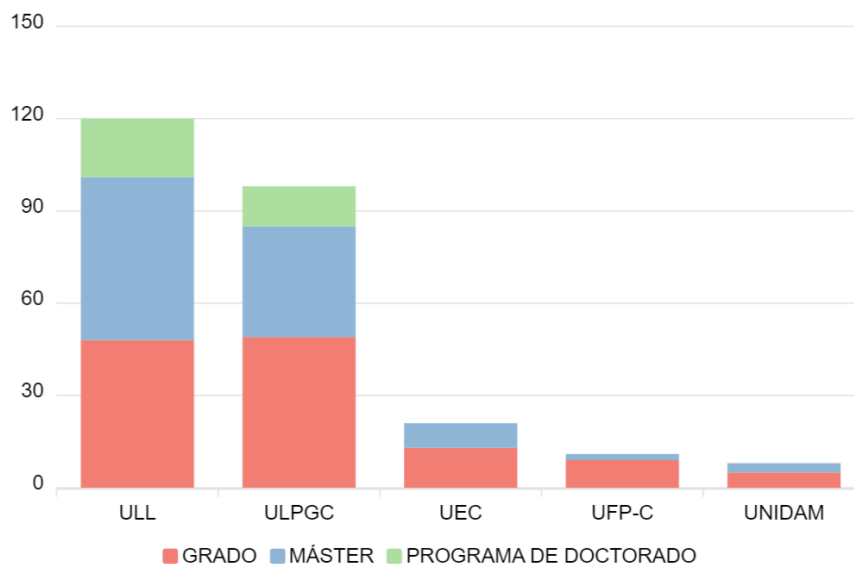


Figure 5. Official degrees by university and educational level
Source: Gobierno de Canarias

Regarding the nationality of the students, 97.31% of the graduates are Spanish (Figure 6).

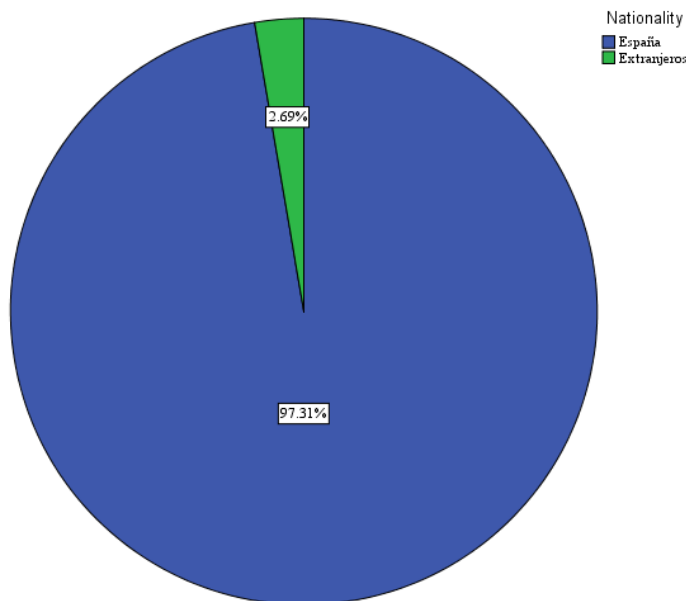


Figure 6. Graduate's nationality
Source: Author's production

In terms of fields of study, most graduates are in the fields of Business, administration and law and Education, having studied at a public university (Figure 7 and Figure 8). Among graduates who studied at a private university, the same two fields have the most graduates. The two fields appear to be the most popular among students, regardless of whether they choose to study at a public or private university.

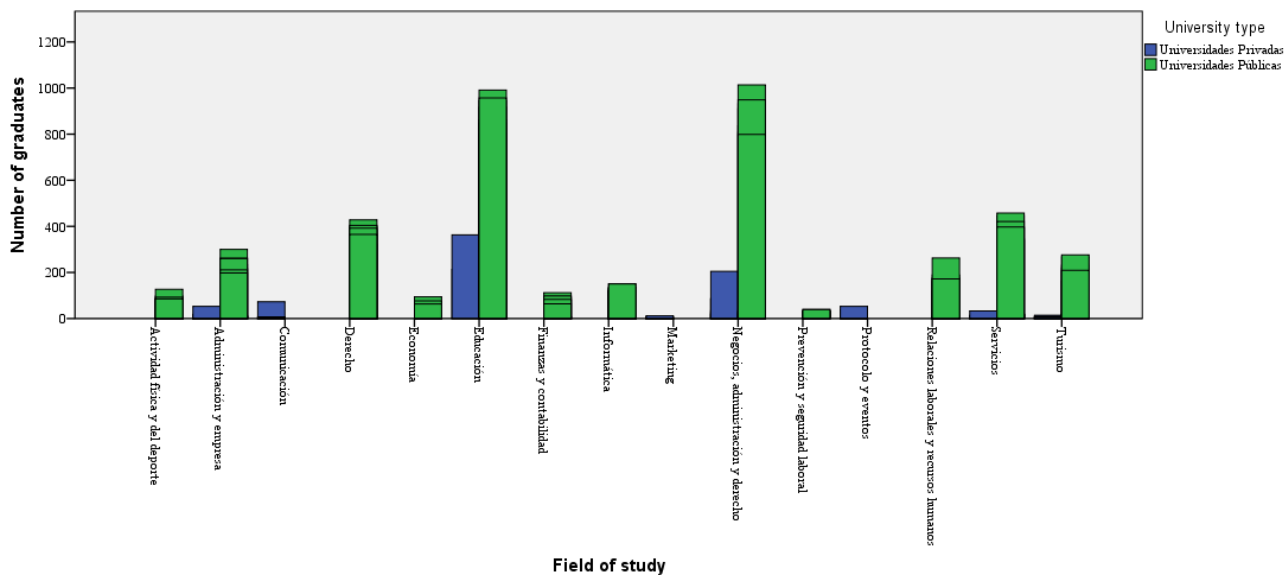


Figure 7. Graduates by university type and study fields
Source: Author’s production

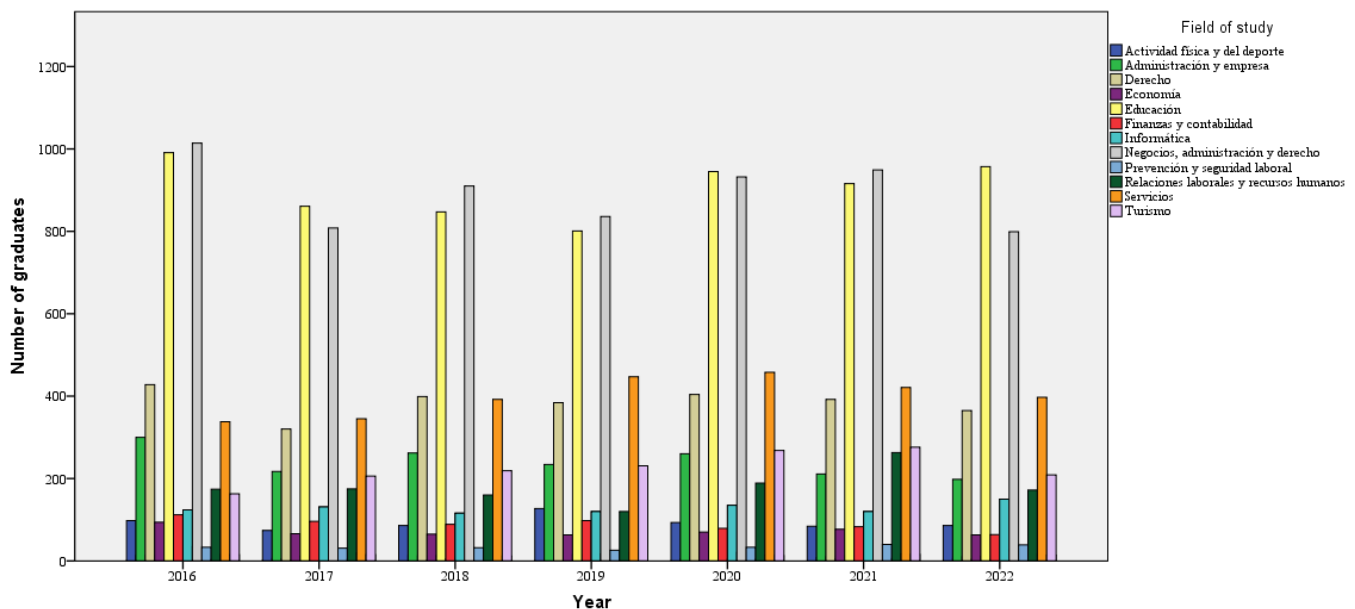


Figure 8. Graduates by study fields for public universities
Source: Author’s production.

Student Life and Opportunities

The Canary Islands offers students a vibrant and enriching environment that combines excellent academic facilities with a unique cultural experience, from highly equipped laboratories to innovative research, from exchange opportunities to the chance to practice with university partners. All these benefits and facilities enrich the academic experience, contribute to the development, and equip students to improve their quality of life.

Campus Facilities and Student Support Services

Universities in the Canary Islands, such as the University of La Laguna (ULL) and the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC), offer state-of-the-art facilities to promote student learning and well-being. The campuses are equipped with modern libraries, research laboratories, sports facilities, and student housing.

These facilities are designed to foster a conducive learning environment and promote a balanced lifestyle. Student support services are comprehensive and meet a variety of needs. Universities offer academic counselling, career counselling, mental health services and support for people with disabilities. In addition, there are numerous student organisations and clubs that provide opportunities for social interaction, skills development, and community involvement. These services provide students with the resources they need to succeed academically and personally.

Cultural and Educational Exchanges Facilitated by EU Membership

As members of the European Union, the Canary Islands have access to a multitude of cultural and educational exchange initiatives. One of the most important programs is Erasmus+, which offers students the opportunity to study or carry out internships in other EU nations. Students participating in this program are exposed to a variety of cultures, languages, and educational systems, which enhances and enriches their academic experience, helping them to develop and adapt more easily to the changes they may encounter in life. In addition, the collaboration between universities in the Canary Islands and other European institutions is facilitated by EU membership. Joint research projects, academic conferences and exchange programs that improve the quality of education are frequently the results of this collaboration. The Canary Islands offer students the chance to take part in these exchanges, broadening their perspectives and building global networks in the process.

Opportunities for International Students and Programs Available

The Canary Islands are increasingly becoming a popular travel destination for international students. Universities offer a wide range of English-language programs aimed at the global student community. These programs cover various disciplines including science, technology, engineering, arts, and humanities. International students benefit from specialised support services, including orientation programs, language courses and cultural integration activities. These services help students adapt to an unfamiliar environment and make the most of their educational experience. Furthermore, the diverse and multicultural atmosphere of the Canary Islands provides a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from all over the world.

Besides European students, the Canary Islands are also attractive to students from Africa, America, or Asia (Figure 9).

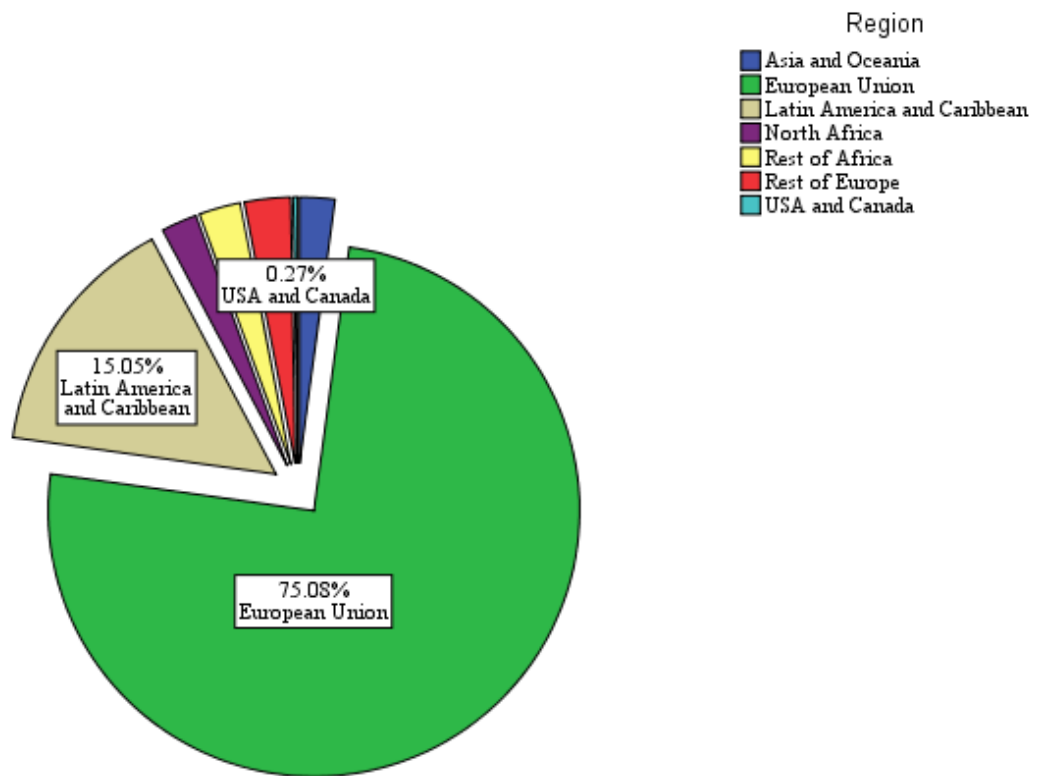


Figure 9. Number of incoming students per region, 2016-2022

Source: Author's production

The pie chart illustrates the geographic distribution of students attracted to the Canary Islands for education. While European students have the most sizeable portion, the chart highlights the diversity of students from other regions as well:

- Latin America and Caribbean: The second-largest segment, representing 15.05% of the total incoming student population.
- Rest of Europe: 2.8% of incoming students.
- Rest of Africa: Making up 2.4%.
- North Africa: Representing 2.1%.
- Asia and Oceania: 2% of incoming students.
- USA and Canada: Comprising 0.27% of the incoming student population.

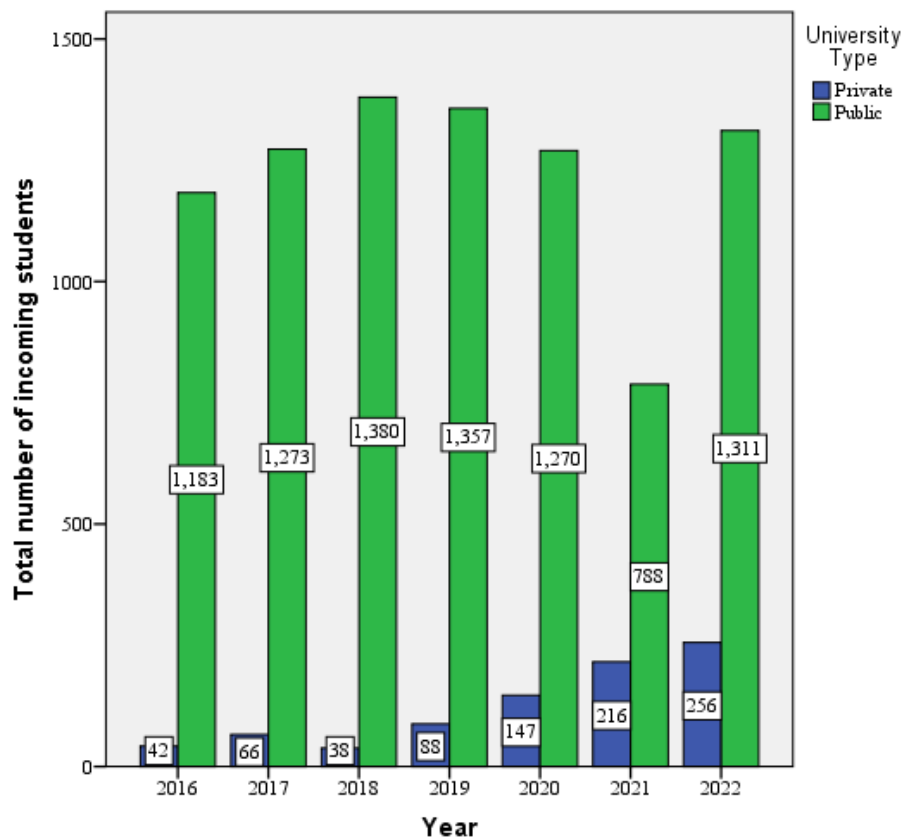


Figure 10. Number of incoming students by university type between 2016 and 2022

Source: Author's production

This chart underscores the Canary Islands' appeal to a diverse student body, attracting individuals from Africa, America, and Asia, in addition to European students.

Figure 10 shows that public universities have the highest number of incoming students. Nevertheless, a decline was observed in 2021 due to travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. In contrast, private universities recorded a significant increase in the number of incoming students, almost doubling their numbers in 2021.

In terms of gender, the majority of incoming students identify themselves as female (Figure 11).

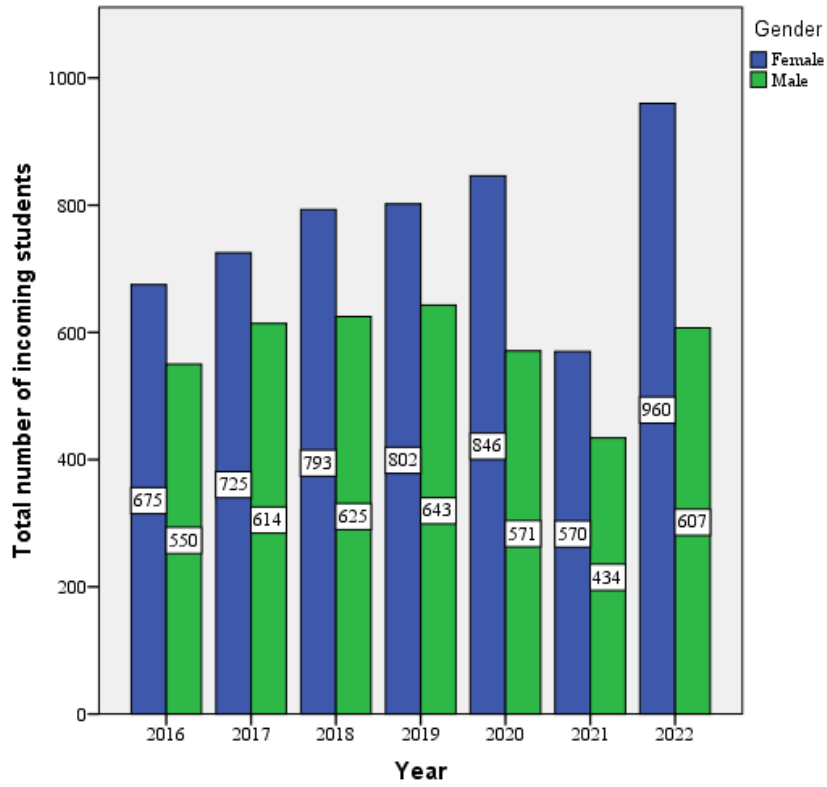


Figure 11. Gender of incoming students between 2016 and 2022

Source: Author's production

The Canary Islands attract a substantial number of international students. However, the number of students from the Canary Islands who go abroad to pursue higher education is significantly smaller (Figure 12).

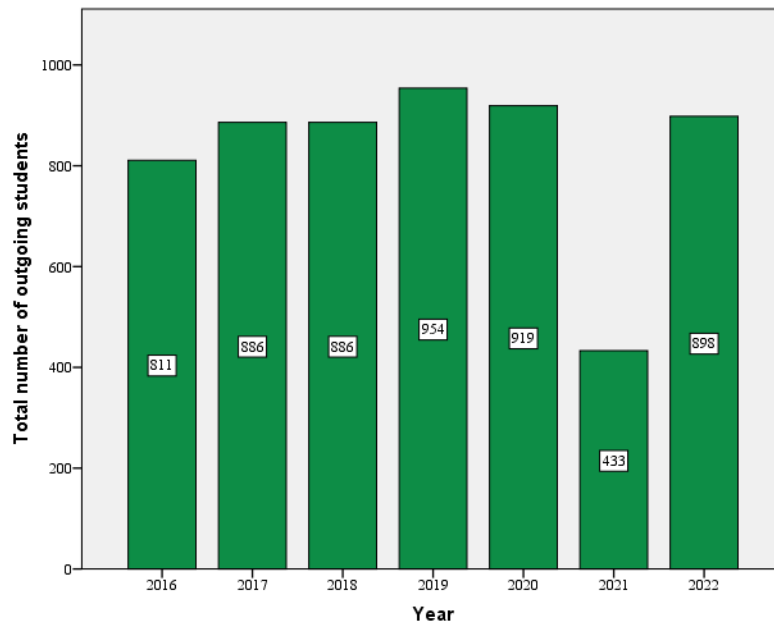


Figure 12. Outgoing students between 2016 and 2022

Source: Author's production

There may be several reasons why students from the Canary Islands choose not to study abroad or undertake short-term higher education. One reason could be the excessive costs of studying abroad, including tuition fees, living expenses and travel costs, which can pose a financial challenge for many students. Another reason is the limited availability of scholarships and funding options for students from the Canary Islands compared to those for international students coming to the Canary Islands. This inequality can discourage local students from pursuing education abroad. Language barriers can also be a factor, as many students in the Canary Islands are fluent in Spanish but may not have the same knowledge of other languages commonly used in higher education institutions abroad, such as English, French, or German.

Similar trends can be observed as for incoming students, a considerable proportion of outgoing students identify as female (Figure 13).

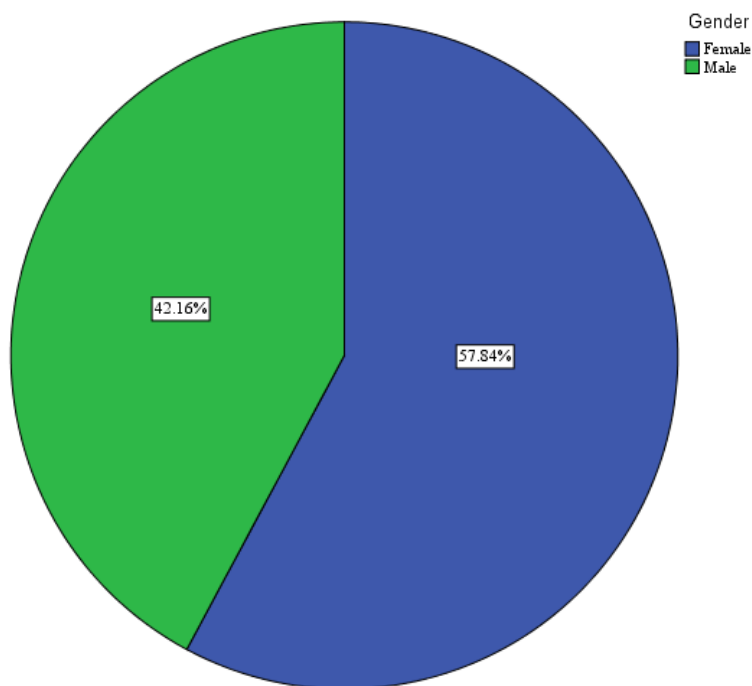


Figure 13. Gender of outgoing students between 2016 and 2022
Source: Author's production

Comparative analysis with EU Countries

The Canary Islands has a unique higher education landscape influenced by its geographical location and socio-economic factors. The student body is minor compared to major EU countries, reflecting the islands' smaller population base. The EU has a diverse higher education landscape with countries such as Germany, France, Italy, and mainland Spain that have large student populations. In Germany alone, over 3.3 million students were enrolled at universities in 2022 (Figure 14).

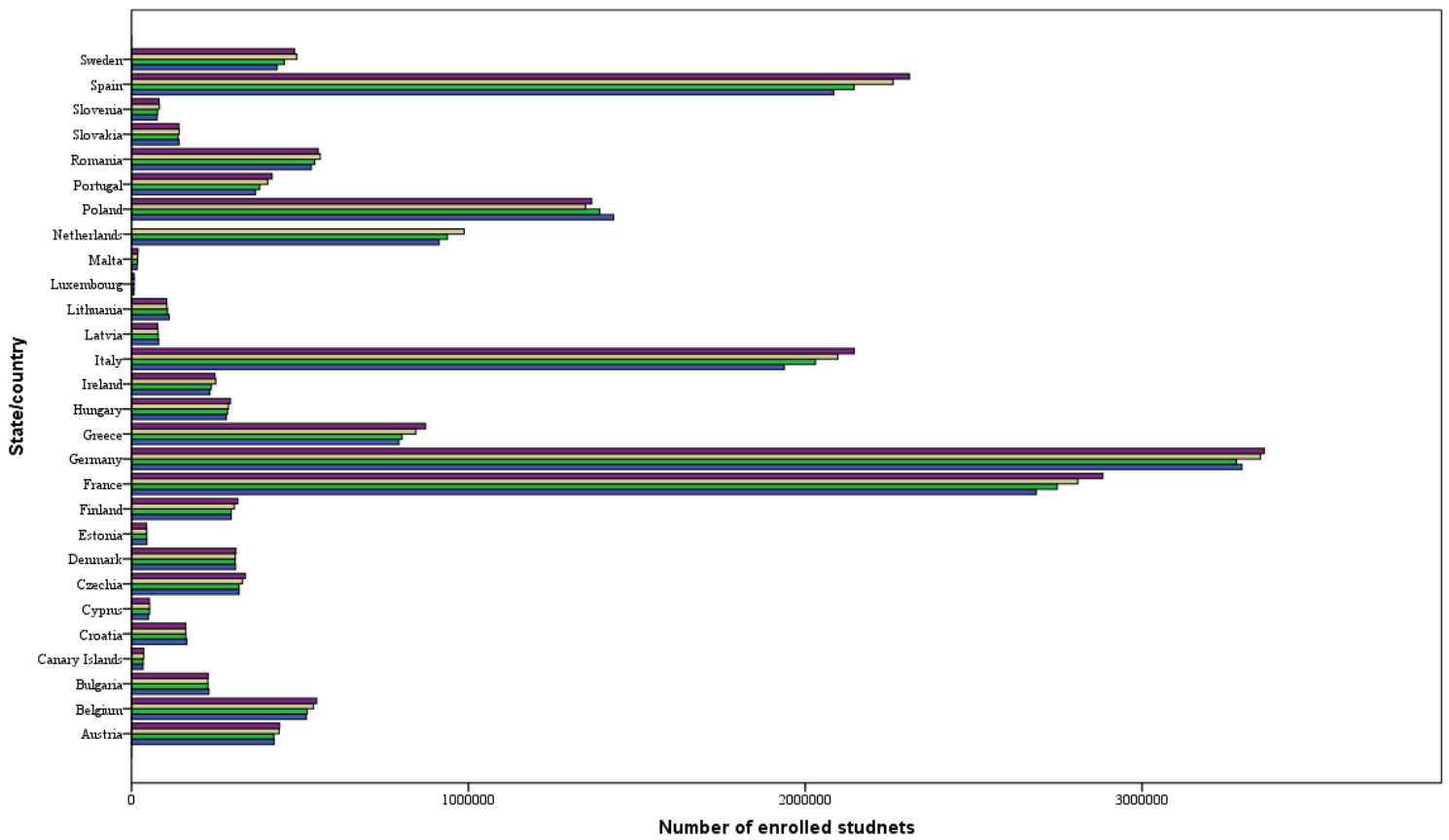


Figure 14. Numbers of enroled students Canary Islands and UE countries, 2019-2022.

Source: Author's production

Enrolment rates vary widely across EU. For instance, countries like Ireland and Luxembourg have high percentages of their population with tertiary education, while countries like Romania and Italy have lower rates. Ireland leads the EU in higher education completion, with 50% of people aged 25-74 having completed it. Luxembourg follows with just under 50%, and Cyprus has 45% of the population. The EU average is just above 30%.

The comparison of graduates from EU countries and the Canary Islands revealed that despite having fewer graduates due to lower enrolments, the Canaries have more graduates than Estonia, Luxembourg, or Malta (Figure 15).

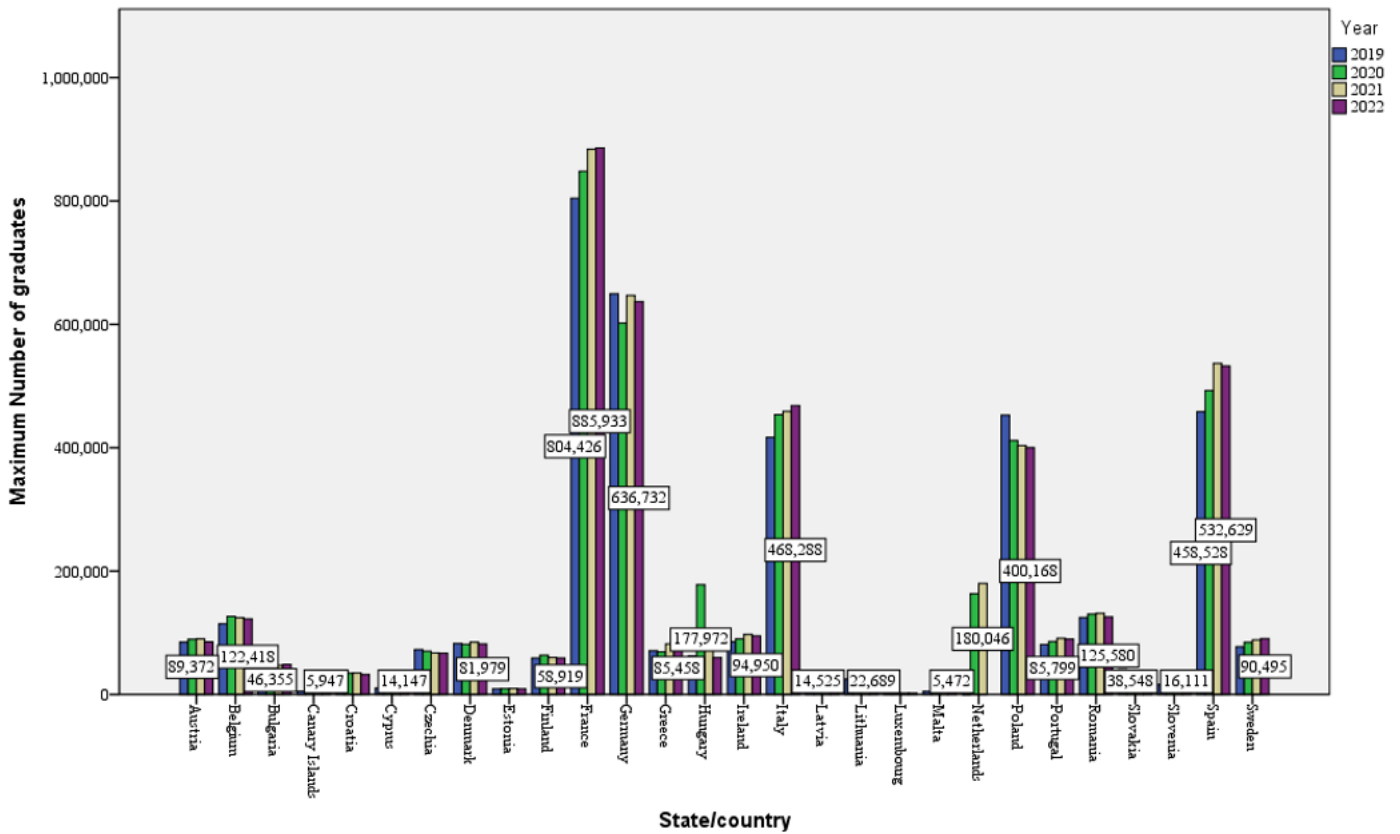


Figure 15. Number of graduates Canary Islands and UE countries, 2019-2022

Source: Author's production

The Canary Islands offer very high-quality higher education. The University of La Laguna, which is ranked 20th among the best universities in Spain and between 701 and 800 worldwide by the Shanghai Ranking in 2023, attests to this. The Universities of Latvia, León (Spain), and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria are the universities with which the University of La Laguna is comparable on the European scene. Ranking for the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria range from 1001 to 1200.

When it comes to international students, Germany stands out as the top destination for incoming students, according to Eurostat (Figure 16). This is illustrated graphically in Figure 16, where Germany is represented by the darkest orange shade, signifying that it is home to between 272,470 and 495,595 international students. This places Germany at the forefront of international education in Europe and is noticeably higher than in other European nations. The number of international students choosing the Canary Islands is comparable to other countries, despite the Canary Islands having a lower overall enrolment (Figure 17).

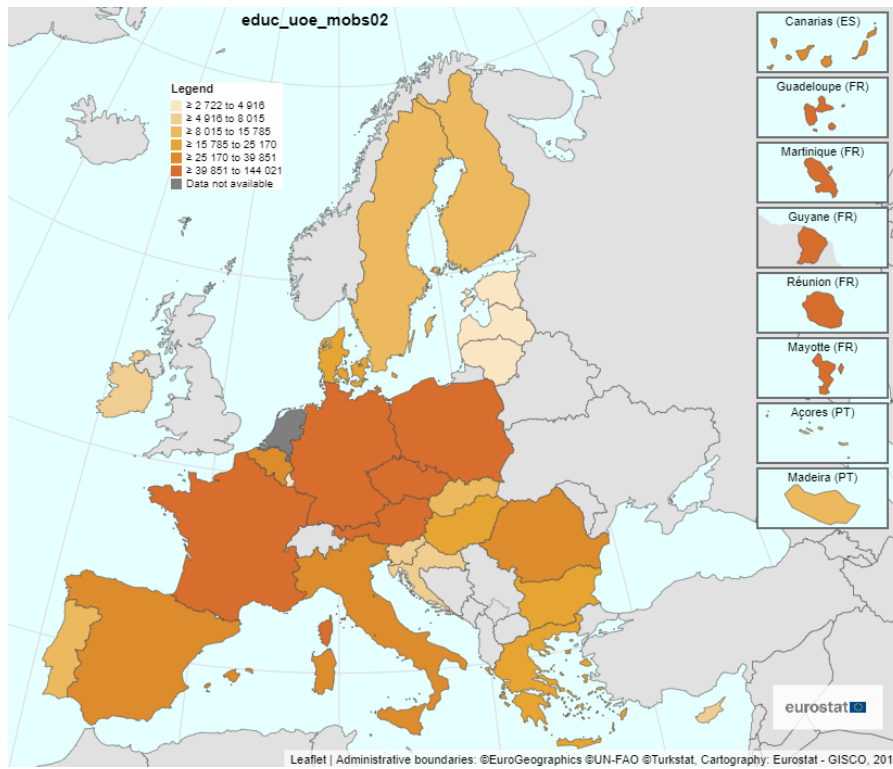


Figure 16. Mobile students from abroad within UE, 2022

Source: Eurostat

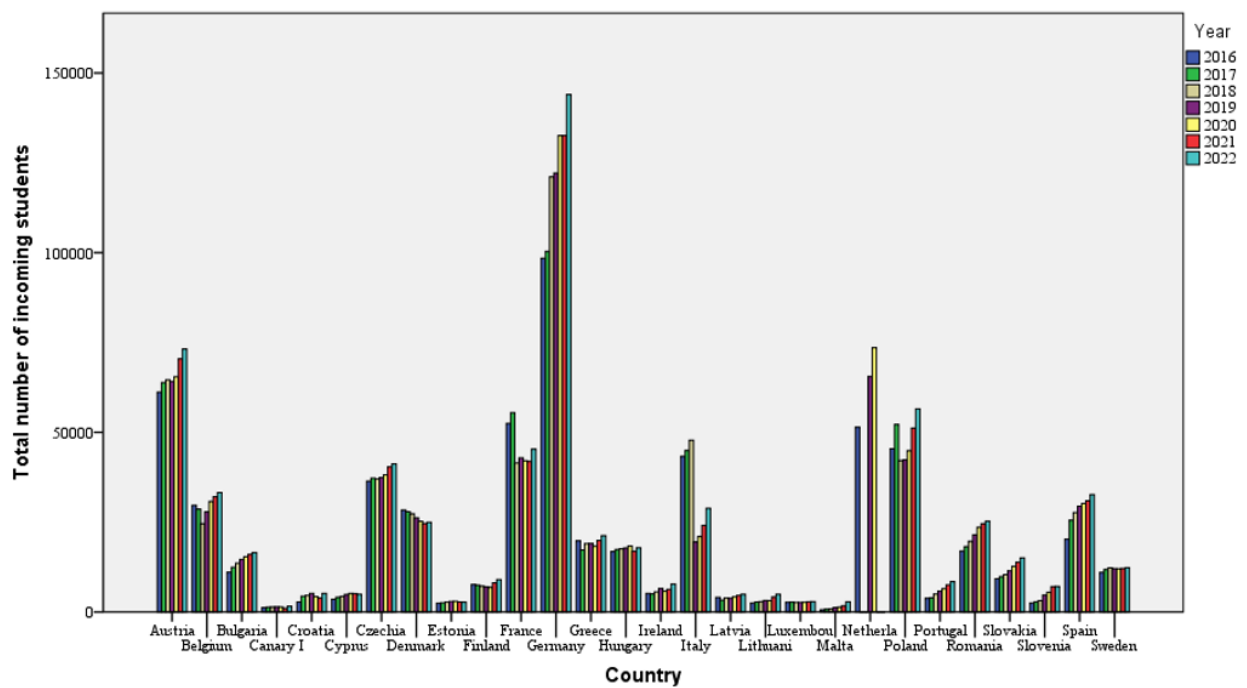


Figure 17. Mobile students within UE and Canary Islands, 2016-2022

Source: Author's production

Conclusion

The higher education landscape in the Canary Islands can be characterised by a unique blend of historical development, regional needs, and cultural influences. Despite challenges, such as limited funding and the need to attract more international students, the region has made considerable progress in providing quality education. However, opportunities exist in niche areas such as tourism (and adjacent fields in economics) and environmental studies, where island universities can offer unique programs. Faculties offering specialisations such as tourism are differentiated by the partnerships they have with universities in the European Union, enabling their students to have some of the best experiences of a student's life: the opportunity to travel and learn about new cultures, the chance to study at a university abroad, to make intercultural friendships, and to intern or work in a foreign company. They also offer students the opportunity to combine theoretical and practical knowledge through partnerships with local and mainland businesses. These aspects set the universities in the Canary Islands apart from many universities in the European Union, which makes them attractive to potential students, but also to international partnerships.

There can be no disputing the major impact on academic and cultural life that the establishment of the University of La Laguna and the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria has had. The commitment to research and innovation, particularly in areas such as marine sciences, renewable energy, and tourism, underlines the Canary Islands' dedication to sustainable development and maintaining high standards of tertiary education. The region's alignment with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) framework ensures the competitiveness and relevance of its academic programs.

Although the number of enrolments in the Canary Islands is lower than in other EU countries, the number of graduates can be compared to several EU countries such as Estonia, Malta, or Luxembourg. Given that the population of the Canary Islands is much smaller than that of any of these countries, it can be said that higher education plays a key role in the lives of Canarians.

Student life in the Canary Islands offers a blend of accessibility, cultural richness, and a relaxed lifestyle, which can be quite appealing compared to the more urban and challenging environments in many EU countries. The region's participation in EU programmes such as Erasmus+ enhances educational opportunities and promotes international cooperation. The growing number of international students choosing the Canary Islands as their destination is steadily increasing, exceeding 1500 students per year. Universities in the Canary Islands not only attract students through their academic programs and local culture, but also encourage their own students to access Erasmus+ mobilities. This is proven by the numerous collaborations between Canary Islands universities and other universities and by the increasing number of students who choose to go on an Erasmus+ mobility to other countries such as Germany, Italy, Sweden, and others.

It can be concluded that universities in the Canary Islands offer world-class facilities, dedicated support networks and numerous opportunities for global interaction. With its emphasis on international engagement, research and innovation, the Canary Islands offers a vibrant and encouraging environment for higher education. Universities in the region can also be seen to offer students a rich and rewarding educational experience, while being well positioned to support the wider goals of European excellence in education and research. Through special programs, campus life or cultural exchanges, students in the Canary Islands can expect an impactful and rewarding educational experience.

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