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Spain's lost generation of graduates join wave of migrants in search of jobs

Rising unemployment has led to an exodus of young Spaniards looking for better opportunities abroad on a scale not seen since the 1960s

Giles Tremlett in Madrid
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Journalism graduate

Nacho Luna has decided to emigrate to London. 'I don't want to form part of the lost generation,' he says. Photograph: Ignacio Luna

In a few weeks' time Nacho Luna will pack his bags and head for London. The 25-year-old graduate from a Madrid journalism school sees no future for himself in Spain and has decided to emigrate.

"I am just one of the many young people who are forced to make this kind of decision," he said. "It's a hard thing to do, but I don't want to form part of what some are already calling the lost generation."

Luna, pictured below, is not sure how he will earn a living, but anything is better than beating uselessly on the door of Spanish companies. The one job he has had since graduating lasted a year before the company went bust.

With 20% unemployment at home, he thinks he can do better in Britain. During the last 10 years booming Spain was a magnet for immigrants, attracting 5 million foreigners. Now Spaniards are talking of a return to the mass emigration of 1960s, when 2 million left looking for jobs in northern Europe. "I only see jobs for exploited interns who earn €300 (£263) a month. That's barely enough to cover the costs of getting to work and back every day," said Luna. "Opportunities are scarce in a country with youth unemployment over 40%."

Luna is not alone. The number of Spaniards living outside the country has increased by 20% over three years as unemployment among Luna's "lost generation" of young workers has climbed to 43%.

When Der Spiegel reported that a Madrid visit by the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, last month would produce an offer of jobs for Spaniards, language schools saw a leap in applicants for German courses. "There was a sudden flood," said Matilde Ferrolasa of Madrid's Tandem school.

Exact numbers of those who have already left are hard to work out. An extra 100,000 Spaniards signed on at consulates abroad in 2010, but many more will have travelled without bothering to register.

Geologist Ignacio Zafra packed his bags in January after finding himself, aged 34, living at home with his parents in Madrid again. He lost his job in 2009 and, after just five job interviews in a year, decided to leave. His only offer had been a job as a door-to-door salesman, with no contract or guaranteed income.

"My unemployment benefits were stopped a few months ago, so I started thinking that emigrating was the best way to find a job that my own country won't give me," he said from his new base in Aberdeen. "I am a realist. I know that things are bad in the UK as well, but they will never be as bad as in Spain. The labour market here is much more active."

The new Spanish emigrants are travelling further than in the 1960s. The US, for example, has received more of them than France and Germany together.

Maria Elena Manzanares, a 29-year-old teacher and broadcaster, will be going to Canada in a few months' time. "It's going to take a couple of years for things to pick up here," she said. "I want to work and improve my skills."

Emerging economies such as Brazil and other Latin American countries are also seeing more Spaniards arriving.

The crucial difference between those leaving now and the manual labourers who sought work in German factories and Swiss restaurants in the 1960s is that today's emigrants are mostly young graduates with years of studying behind them. It is no longer clear that a degree is useful in Spain's paralysed job market. Unemployment among graduates aged 29 or under is running at 19% – almost the same as the national average for all age groups, regardless of education.

Many graduates lie about their education when applying for work, worried that they will be rejected for being overqualified. And 44% of those who find work do so at below their skills level, twice the European average, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The contrast with booming Germany, which is short of 48,000 engineers, could not be greater.

Those graduates who have left say that, for those prepared to chase them, opportunities are far more plentiful abroad.

"Salaries, working hours, conditions and opportunities to advance in your career are far greater here," said 28-year-old Paula Mestre, who left her native Valencia five years ago and is now an IT consultant in Edinburgh.

It took her four months, with relatively poor English, to find a job – but six months later her salary had almost doubled and her company was offering her training. "They kept putting my salary up and giving me more responsibilities," she said. "Spanish companies simply don't invest in their workforce and people tend to work their whole life in one company."

Both she and her Spanish husband, a dentist, are doing far better than they would in Spain. "We're not thinking of going back. Why would I go? To join the dole queue?" she said.

Those who are not leaving, however, are the 5 million immigrants who flocked into Spain during the booming noughties, even though many have lost jobs. Spain's foreign population has, in fact, increased slightly over the past three years. "Virtually no one is going, mostly because their families are already here," confirmed Juan López Jiménez of the Cáritas charity.

Even the promise of free air tickets and financial help (in return for a pledge not to return for several years) cannot persuade them to leave.

"We only had a few hundred people come to us last year," says Xavier Bosch, head of immigration for the Catalan regional government, which runs a scheme to help some of the region's 1.2 million immigrants return home.

Immigrants are harder hit by unemployment than native Spaniards, though many may now be working in a black economy that accounts for 17% of GDP, according to the savings bank foundation Funcas. Figures show unemployment is worst among African immigrants, where it is running at 31%.

The new wave of emigration is not confined to Spain. Similar trends have been spotted in other EU countries blighted by the economic crisis, most notably Ireland and Greece.

But José García-Montalvo, an economist at the Pompeu Fabra university, says Spain is a special case "because we use our human resources so inefficiently". "People spend a lot of time working below their skills level and then, through a simple and pernicious psychological process, start lowering their expectations."

Emigrating, he admits, is a sensible option. For Luna it is the only one. "My desperation obliges me to attempt even the most unlikely things," he says.

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