



## Organisational Capacity and Membership: An Analysis of Professional Associations of Economists in Spain

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**Abstract:** Professional associations play a central role in regulating, training and collectively representing modern economies. However, research has documented a long-term decline in membership and participation across many such organisations, which raises concerns about their sustainability and future relevance. This study examines the relationship between internal organisational capabilities and membership size among professional associations of economists in Spain. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design (N = 23) and an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model estimation, the analysis explores the association between membership size and five key organisational variables: administrative capacity, training activity, digital presence, sex composition, and number of professional associations within the school. The findings indicate a positive and statistically significant association between technical-administrative staffing and membership size; the remaining variables, meanwhile, do not show statistically significant effects. This exploratory and associative study contributes to the literature by shifting the analytical focus from individual motivations to the structural constraints of organisational supply.

**Keywords:** professional associations; organisational capacity; membership; econometric analysis; institutional management.

**JEL classification:** C21; L31; J44.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Professional associations are a fundamental institutional mechanism for organising professions. They regulate access to professional practice, provide ongoing professional development, represent collective interests, and promote a sense of professional identity. Therefore, membership numbers are an important indicator not only of organisational success, but also a determinant of institutional legitimacy and financial sustainability. In recent decades, numerous studies have documented a stagnation or decline in membership rates across various professional sectors (Wang and Ki, 2018; Naidoo and Rajcoomar, 2020; Friedman and Afitska, 2023; Jeza, 2025; Mickevičiūtė, 2026). This phenomenon is linked to structural changes, such as the individualisation of career paths and evolving professional expectations, as well as the proliferation of alternative digital socialisation and networking platforms (Stevens *et al.*, 2023). This has made analysing membership an empirical priority for both academic research and organisational management, particularly for organisations whose only source of income is non-recurring, such as professional associations (Wang and Ki, 2018).

The existing literature mainly addresses this phenomenon from a demand perspective, focusing on individual motivations for joining and remaining in professional associations (Deleskey, 2003; Ki and Wang, 2016). However, this approach implicitly assumes that organisations have homogeneous capacities to generate institutional value, ignoring the structural constraints that condition their internal functioning.

This paper adopts an alternative perspective, focusing on the organisational aspects of institutional supply. It is based on the assumption that a structural determinant of an association's ability to attract, retain and sustain members is its internal capacity, expressed in terms of human resources, administrative infrastructure and management professionalisation. The study's objective is to analyse the relationship between internal organisational capacity and membership size in professional associations of economists in Spain. In line with this objective, the study addresses the central research question: What organisational characteristics explain the differences in membership size between professional associations?

## 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### 2.1. Demand-centred approaches: perceived benefits and membership decisions

A wide range of literature has analysed membership decisions from the perspective of the perceived benefits to individuals. Evidence shows that professional development opportunities, networking and career-related benefits can substantially influence individuals' intentions to join and remain in professional associations (Ki and Wang, 2016; Taylor *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, Deleskey (2003) found that decisions to join professional associations depend on the perceived relevance of the services offered, as well as the usefulness of professional representation and promotional activities. Members develop a more favourable attitude towards their association when they perceive that their needs are being met and that they are receiving support from the organisation (White and Olson, 2004). This positive attitude translates into greater commitment, as evidenced by participation in volunteering activities and a willingness to donate. Similarly, perceived organisational support has been found to be associated with higher levels of member involvement (Wang and Ki, 2018).

These studies consolidate an approach focused on membership demand, whereby affiliation is explained as the result of individual cost-benefit assessment processes. However, this approach does not directly address the organisational constraints that affect the effective provision of these benefits.

## 2.2. Organisational capacity, participation and commitment

From sociological and organisational perspectives, associative participation is closely linked to internal structural factors (Hagedorn and Labovitz, 1967). Organisational capacity influences the ability to coordinate activities, manage communication, maintain stable relationships with members, and sustain long-term commitment dynamics. Recent studies suggest that insufficient organisational adaptation and internal resource constraints are often associated with declining membership (Stevens *et al.*, 2023). From a relational marketing perspective, effective participation requires professional management structures and sustained organisational efforts (Vincent and Webster, 2013).

## 2.3. Organisational determinants of membership growth

Empirical research on institutional growth suggests that internal organisational characteristics are more important than external visibility. Goldman *et al.* (2016) argue that membership growth depends on a combination of service quality, organisational engagement and institutional capacity. Recent research reinforces this thesis by emphasising the importance of participation and organisational engagement for the sustainability of professional associations (Rodríguez-Rad and Sánchez del Río-Vázquez, 2023; Fernandez and Castellanos, 2024).

Taken together, this body of work shifts the analytical focus progressively from individual factors to organisational determinants of membership, although a fully integrated structural theoretical framework has yet to be articulated.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From the perspective of contemporary organisational theory, professional associations can be conceptualised as organisations that are intensive in terms of relational resources, institutional capital, and management capabilities. In this framework, organisational capacity is a strategic asset that influences the coordination of activities, the provision of services, the management of member relations, and institutional sustainability, rather than merely an operating cost. The dynamic capabilities perspective reinforces this view by conceptualising the administrative structure as a mechanism for converting resources into institutional value. Agustí-Pérez *et al.* (2025) show that associations that develop adaptive internal capabilities simultaneously strengthen their institutional legitimacy and organisational competitiveness, thereby consolidating the administrative structure as strategic infrastructure.

From an organisational institutionalist perspective, administrative capacity acts as a mechanism for institutional stabilisation. Bolleyer (2024) conceptualises membership associations as organisations characterised by tensions between professionalisation, governance, and representation. In these organisations, the internal structure supports legitimacy and professional authority. In the field of non-profit organisations and sectoral

associations, [Frasier \(2025\)](#) identifies structural barriers to membership associated with resource scarcity, administrative inadequacy, and organisational limitations. This supports the idea that institutional supply constraints influence membership growth. Similarly, literature on perceived organisational support shows that internal structure directly influences member behaviour. [Wang and Ki \(2018\)](#) illustrate that organisational support and the quality of internal management predict commitment, active participation, and membership retention. This suggests an association between organisational capacity and membership behaviour.

Finally, studies on digital practices and organisational engagement suggest that digitalisation is a complementary factor to, rather than a substitute for, core organisational capacity. Although digital tools can improve communication, participation and the exchange of information, they are only effective when established organisational structures, governance mechanisms and managerial capabilities are in place. In this sense, digitalisation amplifies existing capacities rather than compensating for their absence. This argument aligns with broader research on digital transformation, which highlights the importance of organisational readiness and complementary resources ([Singh et al., 2025](#)). Similarly, [Potnis et al. \(2024\)](#) found that information practices only generate sustained organisational effects when supported by robust institutional and managerial foundations. These findings suggest that, to understand the dynamics of membership in professional associations, it is essential to examine both their digital practices and the organisational capacities that underlie them.

#### 4. THEORETICAL EXPECTATION AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Building on Resource Dependence Theory and Institutional Theory, this study argues that the ability of professional associations to attract and retain members depends not only on individual motivations but also on their internal organisational capacity. Organisations with stronger administrative structures, greater managerial resources, and more developed organisational capabilities are better positioned to provide higher-quality services, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and enhance their capacity to recruit and retain members.

In this study, internal organisational capacity is conceptualised as a multidimensional construct represented by several complementary organisational indicators rather than as a single observable characteristic. Accordingly, the empirical model estimates the joint contribution of these indicators to explain variation in membership size across professional associations.

Based on this theoretical framework, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1:** *Higher levels of internal organisational capacity are positively associated with the membership size of professional associations.*

Thus, the empirical analysis evaluates whether multiple organisational indicators representing a single multidimensional construct - internal organisational capacity - collectively explain differences in membership across professional associations.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

### 5.1. Design and sample

#### *Data cleaning and sample reduction*

A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, with the professional association of economists as the unit of analysis. Data were obtained from public administrative records and official institutional sources. Initially, information was collected from all 39 professional associations of economists in Spain. Seven associations were excluded because they corresponded to duplicated institutional records, leaving 32 unique professional associations.

Data completeness was evaluated prior to model estimation. Missing data accounted for less than 5% of the overall variable matrix. However, these missing values were concentrated within nine associations, primarily because key administrative, staffing, or training information was not publicly disclosed. Consequently, complete-case analysis (listwise deletion) resulted in the exclusion of these nine associations, yielding a final analytical sample of 23 associations.

Listwise deletion was preferred over data imputation because imputing institutional-level variables in a relatively small sample could introduce artificial covariance structures and underestimate standard errors. Nevertheless, because the excluded associations lacked sufficient publicly available information to construct all study variables, the possibility of selection bias cannot be completely ruled out. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as representative of professional associations with sufficient publicly available information rather than the entire population of associations.

Sample coverage. The final analytical sample consists of 23 professional associations, representing 71.8% of the 32 independent professional associations initially identified after removing duplicated institutional records. Although some associations were excluded because complete information was unavailable, the final sample provides broad coverage of the eligible population and includes professional associations from all major geographical areas of Spain.

### 5.2. Data processing and refinements

Information on various structural and institutional factors was collected as explanatory variables. In total, nine quantitative variables were considered. A preliminary analysis of these variables was carried out to select the most appropriate ones and to minimise the risk of overfitting, given the small sample size.

#### **Variable definition**

Logarithmic transformations were applied to the volume variables to reduce the influence of extreme values and improve model stability.

#### **Dependent variable:**

v1. Absolute number of registered members: total number of active professionals registered in the association, representing organisational size. The dependent variable is expressed in logarithms to reduce dispersion and mitigate heteroscedasticity problems.

### Explanatory variables:

v2. Relative number of members (Territorial Affiliation Rate): the percentage of all eligible professionals within the Association's geographical area who are formally registered members. This is calculated as the ratio of active members in the association to the theoretical average of new graduates in economic fields (Economics, ADE, etc.) that each Economists Association in Spain could potentially recruit<sup>1</sup>.

v3. Sex composition of members: The proportion of female members relative to total registered members, expressed as a percentage. Because official public directories provided member names without explicit demographic indicators, an automated AI-assisted name-classification algorithm was used to assign binary demographic sex based on first-name registries. Later, this algorithmic classification has been manually validated against official public administration sex records.

v4. Number of professional associations within the school: Counts the number of societies or firms composed of economists that, under Law 2/2007 on Professional Societies, are required to register with professional associations when carrying out a joint professional activity. It is recorded as a direct numerical value based on the lists available on each association's website.

v5. Diversity of presence on digital channels: refers to the organisation's digital channels for disseminating content beyond the main website. It is measured by directly counting the number of potentially usable high-reach platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, LinkedIn, YouTube, RSS or webmail).

v6. Number of employees and technical/administrative staff at the association: represents the total number of contracted staff (technical and administrative) involved in its daily operations. This figure is usually listed in the 'Structure' section of the association's website.

v7. Number of courses, seminars or conferences offered in the last year: refers to the number of training and continuing professional development (CPD) activities organised by the Association in the last year. It includes the total number of training activities, seminars, or specialised conferences offered during the year 2024.

v8. Number of specialised certifications or registrations managed: represents the number of specialised professional registers (such as REAF for tax advisers or REA for auditors) managed and reported by the Association.

v9. Number of agreements or conventions signed: refers to the total number of formal agreements or collaborations established between the Association and external entities (public administrations, universities, or private companies), such as agreements with the DGT for traffic-related administrative procedures.

These variables capture structural, strategic, and organisational dimensions emphasised in the literature. From a preliminary analysis of the explanatory variables, a logarithmic transformation was applied to those with a high degree of dispersion. Likewise, variable 8, which contains many null values, and variable 9, which shows a high correlation with variables 3 and 7, were excluded from the final analysis.

### 5.3. Descriptive statistics

Table no. 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the study variables. The average female representation is 29.18%, with values ranging from a residual minimum of 0.13% to almost half

of the registered members (46%). In the digital sphere, the institutions show a relatively diversified presence, with an average of 3.91 platforms out of the six considered. However, the most notable feature of the table is the high dispersion in collective and structural reach (v4).

The number of professional associations shows a standard deviation (15.42) that is more than double the mean (6.39), revealing a pronounced asymmetry between associations that appear to focus mainly on individual membership and those that manage up to 67 professional associations. This variability highlights significant differences in organisations' structural capacity to provide network support to their members (Lv1), the logarithmic mean of which is 6.99. Table no. 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables included in the analysis.

**Table no. 1 – Descriptive statistics**

| Variable | Min  | Max  | Mean  | SD    |
|----------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Lv1      | 5.86 | 9.05 | 6.99  | 0.93  |
| v3       | 0.13 | 46   | 29.18 | 12.42 |
| v4       | 0.00 | 67   | 6.39  | 15.42 |
| v5       | 0.00 | 6    | 3.91  | 1.31  |
| Lv2      | 3.98 | 7.17 | 5.12  | 0.93  |
| Lv6      | 2.08 | 3.53 | 2.69  | 0.45  |
| Lv7      | 0.69 | 5.56 | 3.74  | 1.34  |

Notes: SD = standard deviation; N (sample size) = 23.

Source: authors' elaboration

#### 5.4. Correlation analysis

A correlation analysis was conducted prior to model estimation to examine bivariate relationships and identify potential multicollinearity issues among the variables. Table no. 2 presents the Pearson correlation matrix, including the dependent variable (Lv1) and all candidate explanatory variables.

**Table no. 2 – Correlation matrix**

| Variable | Lv1    | v3     | v4    | v5     | Lv2    | Lv6    | Lv7 |
|----------|--------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-----|
| Lv1      | –      |        |       |        |        |        |     |
| v3       | .449*  | –      |       |        |        |        |     |
| v4       | -.189  | -.477* | –     |        |        |        |     |
| v5       | .633** | .610** | -.225 | –      |        |        |     |
| Lv2      | 1**    | .449*  | -.189 | .633** | –      |        |     |
| Lv6      | .829** | .359   | .089  | .596** | .829** | –      |     |
| Lv7      | .698** | .690** | -.333 | .643** | .698** | .653** | –   |

Notes: N = 23. Values are Pearson's correlation coefficients.

\*p < .05 (two-tailed). \*\*p < .01 (two-tailed).

Source: authors' elaboration

The dependent variable, total membership size (Lv1), shows a strong and statistically significant positive correlation with technical-administrative staff (Lv6;  $r = .829$ ,  $p < .01$ ), training activity (Lv7;  $r = .698$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and digital presence (v5;  $r = .633$ ,  $p < .01$ ). A moderate positive correlation is also observed with sex composition (v3;  $r = .449$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while the association with structural reach (v4;  $r = -.189$ ,  $p > .05$ ) is weak and not statistically significant.

Among the explanatory variables, training activity (Lv7) correlates moderately to strongly with sex composition (v3;  $r = .690$ ,  $p < .01$ ), digital presence (v5;  $r = .643$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and technical-administrative staff (Lv6;  $r = .653$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting a degree of overlap between organisational capacity indicators. Structural reach (v4) is the only variable displaying negative associations throughout the matrix, most notably with sex composition (v3;  $r = -.477$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that associations with a larger number of affiliated professional bodies tend to report a lower proportion of female members.

Overall, correlation coefficients among the explanatory variables remain below the conventional threshold of concern for multicollinearity ( $r < .80$ ), with the exception of the relationship between Lv1 and Lv2.

### 5.5. Research model

Due to the small sample size, a parsimonious model specification has been adopted, selecting only the variables that are most theoretically relevant and least statistically redundant. Indicators of organisational capacity, training activity, demographic composition and digital strategy are included, while highly correlated variables that could introduce multicollinearity issues are excluded.

The estimated model was as follows:

$$Lv1 = \beta_0 + \beta_1Lv6 + \beta_2Lv7 + \beta_3v3 + \beta_4v4 + \beta_5v5 + \varepsilon$$

The model was estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS).

### 5.6. Diagnostic Tests

To assess the validity of the regression estimates, several diagnostic tests were performed.

Multicollinearity: Variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all explanatory variables were below the conventional threshold of 5, indicating no evidence of problematic multicollinearity.

Normality of residuals: The Shapiro–Wilk test did not provide evidence to reject the null hypothesis of normality ( $W = .932$ ,  $p = .120$ ), indicating that the residuals did not significantly depart from a normal distribution.

Homoscedasticity: Visual inspection of the residual-versus-fitted plot revealed no obvious evidence of heteroscedasticity. This assessment was further supported by the Breusch–Pagan test, which did not reject the null hypothesis of homoscedasticity ( $F = 2.502$ ,  $p = .071$ ) although the result was close to the conventional threshold and should therefore be interpreted with some caution.

Overall model significance: The statistical significance of the regression model was assessed using the F-test. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 29.

## 6. RESULTS

Table no. 3 – Estimation results

| Model summary |                |                         |            |
|---------------|----------------|-------------------------|------------|
| R             | R <sup>2</sup> | Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | Std. Error |
| .877          | .770           | .702                    | .50803     |

Notes: Predictors: v4, Lv6, v3, v5, Lv7. Dependent variable: Lv1

Source: authors' elaboration

The model shows a strong multiple correlation coefficient ( $R = .877$ ) and explains a substantial proportion of the variance in total membership size, with an  $R^2$  of .770. After adjusting for the number of predictors relative to sample size, the adjusted  $R^2$  remains high at .702, indicating that the five explanatory variables jointly account for approximately 70% of the variance in the dependent variable (Lv1). The standard error of the estimate (.508) reflects the average deviation between observed and predicted values on the log scale.

**Table no. 4 – ANOVA results**

| Model             | SS     | df | MS    | F      | Sig.  |
|-------------------|--------|----|-------|--------|-------|
| <b>Regression</b> | 14.676 | 5  | 2.935 | 11.372 | <.001 |
| <b>Residual</b>   | 4.388  | 17 | .258  |        |       |
| <b>Total</b>      | 19.063 | 22 |       |        |       |

The ANOVA results confirm that the overall regression model is statistically significant ( $F(5, 17) = 11.372, p < .001$ ), indicating that the set of predictors, taken together, explains a significantly greater share of variance in membership size than would be expected by chance. However, given the small sample size ( $N = 23$ ) relative to the number of predictors (five), this high explanatory power should be interpreted with caution, as it may partly reflect sample-specific overfitting rather than a stable population-level relationship.

Table no. 5 presents the individual contribution of each predictor to the model. Among the five explanatory variables, technical-administrative staff (Lv6) is the only statistically significant predictor of membership size ( $B = 1.489, SE = .378, 95\% \text{ CI } [.691, 2.287], \beta = .721, t = 3.943, p = .001$ ). Given the log-log specification of the model, this coefficient can be interpreted as an elasticity: on average, a 1% increase in technical-administrative staff is associated with an estimated 1.49% increase in total membership. The standardised coefficient ( $\beta = .721$ ) indicates that Lv6 is, by a wide margin, the strongest predictor in the model.

None of the remaining predictors reach statistical significance at conventional thresholds:

Structural reach (v4) shows a negative but non-significant association with membership size ( $B = -.013, \beta = -.219, t = -1.517, p = .148$ ). The 95% confidence interval  $[-.032, .006]$  includes zero, so this relationship cannot be confirmed with the available data.

Training activity (Lv7) shows a small positive but non-significant effect ( $B = .092, \beta = .132, t = .630, p = .537$ ).

Sex composition (v3) shows an effect close to zero and non-significant ( $B = -.006, \beta = -.075, t = -.408, p = .688$ ).

Digital presence (v5) likewise shows a small positive but non-significant effect ( $B = .082, \beta = .115, t = .669, p = .513$ ).

In all four non-significant cases, the 95% confidence intervals for  $B$  cross zero, confirming the lack of a reliable linear association with membership size once the effect of the other predictors is held constant.

Overall, the results suggest that, within this model, internal organisational capacity - as captured specifically by technical-administrative staffing levels - is the dominant driver of membership size, while training activity, sex composition, digital presence, and structural reach do not contribute significant explanatory power once Lv6 is accounted for.

Table no. 5 – OLS Regression Results

| Predictor | B     | SE   | 95% CI for B [Lower, Upper] | $\beta$ | t      | p    |
|-----------|-------|------|-----------------------------|---------|--------|------|
| Constant  | 2.579 | .700 | [1.102, 4.056]              | -       | 3.684  | .002 |
| v3        | -.006 | .014 | [-0.036, 0.024]             | -.075   | -.408  | .688 |
| v5        | .082  | .122 | [-0.175, 0.339]             | .115    | .669   | .513 |
| Lv6       | 1.489 | .378 | [0.691, 2.287]              | .721    | 3.943  | .001 |
| Lv7       | .092  | .145 | [-0.214, 0.398]             | .132    | .630   | .537 |
| v4        | -.013 | .009 | [-0.032, 0.006]             | -.219   | -1.517 | .148 |

Notes: Dependent variable: Lv1; B = unstandardised coefficient; SE = Std. Error;

$\beta$  = standardised coefficient.

Source: authors' elaboration

### 6.1 Robustness analysis

To assess whether the results were influenced by regional differences in the size of the economist population, an auxiliary robustness analysis was performed using the **Affiliation Rate (v2)** as an alternative dependent variable. This variable measures the proportion of economists affiliated with the regional professional association, thereby normalizing membership by the total number of economists in each region. The same set of explanatory variables used in the baseline model was retained to evaluate the consistency of the estimated relationships.

As shown in Table no. 5, the auxiliary model remains statistically significant ( $F = 5.520$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ;  $R^2 = 0.619$ ). Most importantly, the main explanatory variable (Lv6) continues to exhibit a positive and statistically significant association with the affiliation rate ( $\beta = 0.701$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), while the remaining predictors do not materially alter the substantive conclusions. These findings indicate that the main results are not driven by regional differences in the size of the underlying population of economists and therefore support the robustness of the baseline model.

Table no 6 – Auxiliary OLS Regression Results

| Predictor | B         | SE      | 95% CI for B [Lower, Upper] | $\beta$ | t      | p    |
|-----------|-----------|---------|-----------------------------|---------|--------|------|
| Constant  | -1242.691 | 330.158 | [-1939.264, -546.118]       | -       | -3.764 | .002 |
| v3        | 2.573     | 6.489   | [-11.116, 16.263]           | .094    | .397   | .697 |
| v4        | -2.259    | 4.117   | [-10.945, 6.427]            | -.102   | -.549  | .590 |
| v5        | -23.711   | 57.617  | [-145.273, 97.851]          | -.091   | -.412  | .686 |
| Lv6       | 531.089   | 178.086 | [155.360, 906.817]          | .701    | 2.982  | .008 |
| Lv7       | 33.157    | 68.515  | [-111.397, 177.711]         | .130    | .484   | .635 |

Notes: Dependent variable: v2; B = unstandardised coefficient; SE = Std. Error;

CI = Confidence Interval.  $\beta$  = standardised coefficient.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Table no. 6 presents the results of the auxiliary regression model, in which the affiliation rate (v2) replaces total membership size as the dependent variable, in order to assess whether the main findings are driven by regional differences in the underlying population of economists. Consistent with the baseline model, technical-administrative staff (Lv6) remains the only statistically significant predictor ( $B = 531.089$ ,  $SE = 178.086$ , 95% CI [155.360, 906.817],  $\beta = .701$ ,  $t = 2.982$ ,  $p = .008$ ). The standardised coefficient ( $\beta = .701$ ) is very close

to that obtained in the main model ( $\beta = .721$  for Lv6 in [Table no. 4](#)), indicating a consistent pattern across specifications. Taken together, the auxiliary model reproduces the substantive pattern of the baseline analysis, with organisational capacity (Lv6) emerging as the sole significant driver, and no material change in the sign, magnitude, or significance ranking of the remaining predictors.

## 7. DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between the organisational capacity of professional associations of economists in Spain and their membership size. The results suggest a positive correlation, showing that associations with greater internal resources tend to have larger membership bases. This finding is consistent with theoretical approaches suggesting that organisational management constitutes a strategic organisational capacity rather than merely an administrative function. One possible explanation is that larger staff structures allow for more effective administration, service delivery, and member support. Alternatively, larger associations may generate greater financial resources, enabling them to employ more staff. However, the cross-sectional design of this study does not allow these alternative explanations to be fully explored, and it is not possible to establish causal relationships conclusively. Nevertheless, these results are consistent with previous research emphasising the importance of organisational resources in sustaining member participation and institutional functioning ([Vincent and Webster, 2013](#); [Ki and Wang, 2016](#); [Stevens \*et al.\*, 2023](#)). Overall, the findings support existing theoretical expectations regarding organisational capacity, even though the underlying mechanisms remain unclear.

The lack of statistical significance in terms of training activity and digital presence may be explained by the concept of supply saturation. Once professional associations offer broadly similar training programmes and have an online presence, these services no longer differentiate organisations in terms of membership size. In other words, such offerings no longer provide a competitive or strategic advantage once they become standard practice. This is consistent with the argument that organisational growth may be associated with both the range of services offered and the extent to which these services are integrated with internal capabilities, such as administrative efficiency, member engagement mechanisms, and strategic planning ([Singh \*et al.\*, 2025](#)).

Similarly, the absence of a statistically significant effect of sex composition suggests that the overall growth dynamics of professional associations are driven primarily by structural and managerial factors rather than workforce demographics. While sex diversity may influence organisational culture, collaboration patterns or decision-making styles, these factors do not appear to be associated with differences in aggregate membership size. This finding suggests that variation in membership size is more closely associated with institutional and managerial capacities than with workforce demographic composition. It is important to note that non-significant results do not imply that these factors are unimportant. For example, training activities may be more closely associated with member satisfaction, retention or engagement - outcomes that are not directly captured by overall membership size. Similarly, a digital presence may be associated with improved communication and engagement without necessarily causing an immediate increase in membership. These interpretations are consistent with previous research emphasising the importance of participation behaviour and organisational commitment rather than activity volume alone ([Beaton, 2010](#); [Rodríguez-Rad](#)

and Sánchez del Río-Vázquez, 2023). While sex composition does not appear to influence total membership size, it may affect other organisational performance dimensions, such as governance quality, representativeness and inclusivity. However, these were beyond the scope of this study.

### 7.1. Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, these findings provide support for organisational-level explanations of professional association membership. They imply that strategies centred solely on individual motivations or perceived advantages could overlook the structural limitations and institutional capabilities that influence membership outcomes. Thus, internal organisational capacity emerges as a crucial determinant of membership size, emphasising the importance of considering strategic and managerial factors, as well as individual-level motivations, in the study of professional associations.

### 7.2. Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, the results suggest that associations may be able to maintain or grow their membership by strengthening their internal organisational capacity. However, this should not be interpreted as a recommendation for the indiscriminate expansion of staff or resources. Rather, the results emphasise the importance of aligning organisational resources with strategic objectives related to service provision, member engagement and institutional functioning. Associations should focus on effectively integrating staff, financial and managerial resources to support sustainable growth.

Finally, due to the cross-sectional design and the potential for reverse causality, these findings should be considered indicative of associations rather than indicating causal relationships. Future research using longitudinal or experimental designs could provide further insight into the causal mechanisms linking organisational capacity and membership size.

### 7.3. Methodological limitations

This study has several structural limitations that should be acknowledged. Endogeneity and reverse causality. It is plausible that there is a bidirectional relationship between organisational capacity and membership size. Organisations with larger memberships may have greater financial resources, enabling them to expand their administrative structures. This creates potential simultaneity bias in the OLS estimates. The absence of valid instruments and longitudinal data prevents causal identification.

Cross-sectional design: The lack of longitudinal data precludes analysis of temporal dynamics and organisational adjustment processes, limiting findings to static associations.

Sample size and selection bias. Although the sample represents a substantial proportion of active professional associations, the final analytical sample was limited to  $N = 23$  due to complete-case (listwise deletion), as some organizations did not publicly disclose the administrative, staffing, or training information required to construct all study variables. This reduction from 32 to 23 associations may have introduced selection bias if excluded organizations differ systematically from those included, limiting the representativeness of the findings to associations with sufficient publicly available information. In addition, the small

sample size provides limited statistical power and a low cases-to-predictor ratio (approximately 4.6:1), increasing the risk of overfitting. Therefore, despite the high adjusted  $R^2$  (0.702), the regression results should be considered exploratory, and future studies with larger and more diverse cross-sectoral samples are needed to confirm the stability and generalizability of these findings.

**Construct validity:** Some proxy variables (e.g. training activity and digital presence) capture volume or diversity, but do not adequately reflect quality, intensity of use or perceived value for members.

**Omitted variables:** Additional factors that may influence membership size were not included in the analysis.

**Regional target population heterogeneity:** Although the robustness analysis using the affiliation rate (v2) suggests that the main findings are not driven by differences in the regional size of the economist population, unobserved regional socioeconomic and institutional characteristics may still influence organizational performance. Future studies with larger samples should incorporate additional regional-level variables and, where appropriate, multilevel analytical approaches to better capture contextual effects.

Future research could consider factors such as membership fees, payment structures (e.g. differentiated fees for practising, non-practising or unemployed members) and multiple affiliations (e.g. membership of both a professional association and REAF).

Although these limitations do not invalidate the study's contribution as an exploratory analysis, they do constrain its inferential scope. Future research using longitudinal designs, larger samples, or mixed-methods approaches could provide stronger evidence of the mechanisms linking organisational capacity to membership outcomes.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined organisational factors associated with membership numbers in Spanish professional associations of economists. The results revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between organisational size, as measured by the number of administrative and technical staff, and membership size. In contrast, factors frequently emphasised in the literature, such as training activities, digital presence and sex composition, did not exhibit statistically significant associations within the estimated model. These findings provide further evidence that organisational characteristics are associated with membership outcomes and supplement prior research, which has primarily focused on individual motivations for joining professional associations.

However, the results should be interpreted with caution. The cross-sectional design and limited sample size constrain causal inference and generalisability, and the observed relationships may reflect reciprocal effects or unobserved mechanisms. From a practical perspective, the analysis suggests that professional associations seeking to maintain or expand their membership base should consider the importance of internal organisational resources. However, the findings do not imply that increasing staff numbers alone will necessarily lead to membership growth. Rather, they emphasise the importance of aligning organisational capacity with strategic objectives concerning member services and engagement. As [White and Olson \(2004\)](#) observed in their analysis of associations in the complex healthcare sector, membership among 81 highly qualified professionals depended on being well-informed, having access to professional networks and receiving tangible benefits. These factors

encourage associations to establish specialised committees to provide comprehensive, personalised services to potential members.

In the case of economists, the variety of potential areas of specialisation - such as REA (Auditor Economists), REAF (Tax Advisor Economists), REFOR (Forensic Economists), EC (Accounting Economists), EAL (Labour Advisors), EAF (Financial Advisors), EMK (Marketing/Commercialisation Expert Economists) and REDI (Teachers and Researchers) - highlights the need for organisational structures that offer both quantitative and qualitative responsiveness. Likewise, [Fernandez and Castellanos \(2024\)](#) note that professionals form associations to collectively shape their fields through advice, promotion, training, and mutual adjustment.

Future research could build on these findings by employing longitudinal data, expanding the analysis to other professional sectors and incorporating qualitative indicators of organisational effectiveness. Such extensions could help identify the mechanisms underlying the observed associations and strengthen the empirical basis for policy and management recommendations.

In summary, the results indicate a systematic association between organisational capacity and membership numbers in professional associations of economists. While the results do not support strong claims about cause and effect, they contribute to a growing body of evidence suggesting that internal organisational resources are an important factor in membership outcomes. This perspective is a useful starting point for future empirical research and reflective organisational practice.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It was estimated that 28,000 people graduate annually in Spain with degrees related to economics and are potentially members of the Associations of Economists (Economics, Business Administration and Management, Finance, etc.). Dividing this number by the 32 existing associations, the theoretical average number of new potential pre-members or members that each association could have recruited is approximately 875 graduates