NQF state of play

🇪🇸 **Spain** 2024

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Overview

Stage of development: Activation stage

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:
The NQF includes formal qualifications from general education, VET (microcrendentials, professional certificates, intermediate and higher tertiary programmes), artistic education, sports education and university education .

Number of levels:

Eight

Legal basis/stage of development:

Royal Decree 272/2022 on the Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning
(in Spanish)

NQF/EQF website:
Website

Qualifications register/database:
Register of Universities, Centres and Degrees (RUCT)
The National repertoire of professional certificates

Introduction and context

1.1. Policy context

In Spain in 2022, public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product was 4.4%, slightly lower than the EU average. The rate of early school leaving (age 18-24) has decreased steadily in recent years (from 26.3% in 2011 to 13.7% in 2023), but rates still vary between regions. In 2022, participation in early childhood education was 96.7% (compared to an EU-27 average of 93.1%). In 2023, tertiary educational attainment (age 25-34) was high (52%), while participation in upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) remained below the EU average at 40.5%. In 2023, the employment rate of recent VET graduates was significantly increased when compared to 2020 (65,8 % and 50.3 % respectively) (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport & Culture, 2024).

1.2. NQF legal basis

The organic laws on education and on the integration and organisation of vocational training laid the foundation for the establishment of MECU and introduced a four-year plan for its development. The framework was adopted on the basis of Royal Decree 272/2022 on the Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning. This decree constitutes the first stage in the development of MECU. The framework covers formal education and training, not including non-formal training, which will be incorporated in a second phase (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). MECES was set up by the Royal Decree 2027/2011.

Policy objectives

The main objective of the MECU is to guide the classification, comparability and transparency of officially accredited qualifications. Other specific objectives of the framework include:

a. easing the understanding of qualifications by describing them in terms of learning outcomes and placing them in the framework through a coherent levelling approach;
b. promoting citizens' mobility across European boarders and in the international labour market;
c. supporting lifelong learning, linking initial and continuing VET, and increasing participation in such training, especially for vulnerable groups;
d. promoting the identification, validation and recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning;
e. fostering permeability among education and training sectors. (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

3.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

MECU is based on learning outcomes and has eight levels, with descriptors defined, in accordance with the EQF, in terms of knowledge, skills, and autonomy and responsibility. The framework provides a clear link between the included qualifications and the corresponding level descriptors adapted to suit the national context. This is particularly the case for skills, where analytical skills and the ability to communicate in different languages are emphasised. Competence is defined as autonomy and responsibility, including learning skills and attitudes. The four highest levels are compatible with the Spanish qualifications framework for higher education (MECES), based on the level descriptors of cycles for the QF-EHEA. Levels 4 and 5 include sublevels A, B and C. Sublevels 4A and 5A include qualifications combining general and vocational education; they lead to the next MECU level ([1]). Professional qualifications that do not lead to the next MECU level are included in sublevels 4B and 5B. Sublevels 4C and 5C include specialisation courses that do not lead to the next MECU levels, and learners should hold a qualification at sublevel 4A or 5A respectively to attend them. MECU level 3 includes only sublevels 3A and 3B ([2]).

3.2. NQF scope and coverage

The MECU includes formal qualifications from general education, VET ([3]), artistic education, sports education and university education (General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024). Higher level VET programmes at MECU level 5 are considered non-university higher education and are included in the framework to promote lifelong learning. Even though these programmes are delivered outside the university system, when their subjects/learning outcomes are properly aligned, they can be recognised for admission to university and as ECTS credits.

The 2022 organic law on VET classifies formal vocational training. Grade A represents the elementary VET offering, encompassing partial accreditation of competence or microcredentials. Learners in Grade B can attain a certificate of competence, which is a partial training offer in the form of a vocational module, contributing to qualifications at Grades C and D. Grade B certificates of competence can be stacked to lead to a professional certificate. Professional certificates at Grade C, are partial

qualifications composed of several vocational modules. Grade D includes VET programmes leading to full qualifications: basic technician (*grado básico*), technician (*grado medio*), or higher technician (*grado superior*); their duration is between 2 and 3 years. Grade E consists of specialisation courses, which primarily serve to complement the competences of those who have already achieved a VET qualification. Partial accreditation, certificates of competence and professional certificates (respectively at grades A and B and C) are considered microcredentials. Certificates at grades A and B can be accumulated eventually leading to VET qualifications levelled to MECU, but they are not included individually in the framework (Cedefop, 2023; General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). Regarding VET qualifications, the MECU includes 1 018 professional certificates (Grade C); 177 VET diplomas (Grade D) and 26 specialisation courses (Grade E) (September 2024) ([4]).

3.3. Use of learning outcomes

The use of learning outcomes varies across education sectors. The education ministry has established through legislation, national core curricula for the various levels of education: pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and vocational training. These are determined by the central government, though regional administrations and schools take responsibility for developing part of the curriculum ([5]). The core curricula determine the general objectives for each education level, along with the specific objectives for each area or subject. They also establish the content and evaluation criteria for each area, the basic skills and pedagogical methods for each level of compulsory education.

The 2020 organic law on education has also promoted a more competence-based approach to curriculum design. In primary and secondary education (including basic VET programmes) and the Baccalaureate, the key and specific competences to be achieved by learners are described in legislation. The education exit profile includes the competences that learners should have acquired on completing each stage of their educational pathway (General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024). Basic VET programme graduates receive a compulsory secondary education graduate degree (ESO), granting them access to upper secondary education. These programmes, also available to early leavers over the age of 17, integrate general and vocational subjects.

The most developed and detailed implementation of learning outcomes is in VET. The organic law on vocational training reinforces the learning-outcome-based modular structure of all grades. The learning outcomes of

VET qualifications are in line with the relevant standard of professional competences, while VET programmes include learning units on career guidance, entrepreneurship and transversal competences for socio-professional maturity (Cedefop & ReferNet, 2024).

The National catalogue of standards of professional competences (*Catálogo Nacional de estándares de competencia profesionales,*) lists 776 standards defined in 2 586 units of competences. The National Institute of Qualifications (INCUAL) acts as the technical support body to the General Council of Vocational Training responsible for developing and keeping up to date the National catalogue.

MECU refers directly to learning outcomes (*resultados de aprendizaje* and *competencias*). Higher education study programmes should include the expected learning outcomes and how they should be achieved.

3.4. Quality assurance arrangements

The National Institute for Educational Evaluation is the responsible body of the education ministry for the evaluation of education, in collaboration with education and training authorities. The institute coordinates the general evaluation policies and develops methodological and scientific standards, which aim to ensure the quality of teaching. It is also responsible for the development of the State system of education indicators and coordinates the evaluation of education and training providers alongside corresponding bodies of the education administrations. The High State Inspectorate, operating also under the education ministry, is responsible for verifying providers' compliance with the State quality requirements and ensuring that the basic aspects of the national curriculum are included in the curricula established by the education administrations. The inspectorate also ensures that providers respect the conditions for awarding qualifications (General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024).

External quality assurance in university education is undertaken by the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) and a number of agencies within specific autonomous regions. The competences of the quality assurance agencies vary. All study programmes must be accredited in accordance with national guidelines. Linked to MECES levels, learning outcomes are a specific requirement in the *ex post* external evaluation of study programmes, which is part of the accreditation procedure of all formal degrees (or the renewal of this accreditation). Consideration of the use of learning outcomes is also a specific requirement in the external evaluation of a higher education

institution or unit's internal quality assurance systems during audit procedures.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The General Secretariat for VET of the education ministry is responsible for the overall coordination, development, oversight and day-to-day running of MECU. It is also the designated EQF national coordination point (NCP). Employees from the secretariat are involved in the day-to-day implementation of MECU, which is supported by the regular budget of the ministry (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

A wide range of stakeholders were involved and consulted in developing the MECU, including ministries, social partners (i.e. the Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organisations, Spanish Confederation of Small and Medium Enterprises), the Sectoral Education Conference, the General Conference for University Policy), consultative bodies (e.g. State School Council, Vocational Training Council) as well as evaluation agencies, professional associations and regional education councils.

The implementation of MECU is also supported by various other bodies. A function of the General Secretariat for Universities is to handle the procedure of referencing university degrees belonging to previous academic orders, as well as professional and higher education qualifications that have been declared equivalent to such degrees, to the MECES and thus to the MECU. The Sectoral conference on education, composed by the education administrations of the autonomous communities is another crucial body. For example, the MECU draft regulations were submitted for consultation to the General Education Commission, which is a supporting body to the conference. The Sectoral Conference on Education is expected to promote agreements to improve the quality of the education system (General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

5.1. Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

The Royal Decree 659/2023 regulates validation of professional competences, i.e the procedure for accrediting competences acquired through work experience or other non-formal and informal pathways. The Royal Decree 86/2025 regulates validation of basic skills, promoting access to training programmes. It sets up the procedure for the evaluation and accreditation of basic skills acquired through work experience, non-formal training and informal learning; it will be implemented nationwide in the 2025-26 academic year. This initiative will allow citizens who demonstrate a minimum level in Spanish, mathematics and digital competence, but lack the necessary academic qualifications, to access the VET system, thereby improving their opportunities in the labour market.

The royal decree introducing the MECU, links the framework with validation and lifelong learning. Validation can lead to a qualification levelled to MECU. Validation is integrated into the qualification system, enabling individuals to progress and access different levels and types of education. The 2022 organic law on vocational training supports the recognition of ECTS credits between VET and higher education to facilitate mobility between these sub-systems. Further, according to this law, credentials obtained through validation can be stacked leading to a VET qualification and a national registry of accreditations of the professional competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning is introduced (Gonzalez-Yubero, 2024).

The national system of validation covers secondary education for adults, VET and university education using various procedures. Validation arrangements include examinations to obtain a full or partial qualification (i.e in compulsory or upper secondary education and in VET), admission exams to VET programmes for those who do not meet the regular entrance requirements and the recognition of professional competences acquired through work experience and non-formal learning. In higher education, there are admission exams for adults and procedures for the recognition of professional experience for adults over 40 years old, offering access to formal programmes. Further, recognition non-formal

and informal earning, including work experience, can grant credits towards a university degree (Gonzalez-Yubero, 2024).

NQF implementation and impact

6.1. Stage of implementation

MECU is at the activation stage; it was formally adopted through Royal Decree 272/2022.

6.2. Procedures for including qualifications in the NQF

The Royal Decree which set up the MECU, regulates the levelling of qualifications as a shared responsibility of the ministries for education and universities by issuing the necessary regulations. While developing the MECU, qualifications were assigned to MECU levels based on three criteria:

a. the comparability of qualifications' learning outcomes with the MECU level descriptors;
b. the implementation of common quality assurance criteria for qualifications in line with Annex IV to the 2017 EQF recommendation;
c. public consultation with bodies involved in the design, award and use of qualifications in a relevant field.

During the levelling procedure, the intended learning outcomes of each qualification were identified ([6]) and analysed to reference them to the appropriate MECU level. In levelling qualifications, the full-fit ([7]) approach was used when possible; in the remaining cases the best-fit ([8]) approach was applied. The outcomes of the levelling procedure were certified by the education ministry.

The inclusion of new qualifications in the MECU should be approved by the Government after consultation with the autonomous communities, or following a request of the autonomous communities. The curriculum of the programme leading to the qualification should be in line with the relevant legal requirements. The Secretary General for Vocational Training is responsible for including and levelling VET qualifications (General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024).

In university education, the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation is responsible for levelling qualifications to MECES and thus to MECU. Qualifications included in the frameworks undergo a specific procedure to be accredited. Initially, universities develop a syllabus for each programme, which should be approved by the Council of

Universities and the corresponding Autonomous Community. Then the syllabus is sent to ANECA, which is responsible for drafting the assessment report. The Council of Universities communicates the resolution to the education ministry, to concerned autonomous community(ies) and to the university. The Government publishes the approval of the proposal to the official State gazette and the degree is then listed in the Register of Universities, Centres and Degrees (RUCT) (General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024).

6.3. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

Following the referencing of the MECU to the EQF, each competent body will implement the necessary legal changes to enable the indication of MECU/EQF levels on all new and reviewed qualifications (General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024). EQF levels are indicated on some qualifications at EQF level 3 and above on the regulations, the diploma, diploma supplement or Europass supplement (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

6.4. NQF dissemination

A website was developed with the adoption of MECU. The website provides information on the new framework and its structure, and a comparison with the EQF. It also includes links to the main legal documents relating to MECU (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

6.5. Qualifications databases and registers

Individuals have access to information on qualifications through different websites, which are not interconnected. Depending on the sub-system they are interested in, individuals can access the Register of Universities, Centres and Degrees (RUCT) and the website todoFP, which provides data on vocational qualifications and professional certificates and on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, along with career guidance. The RUCT provides information on qualifications regarding the field of study, the learning outcomes, the awarding body and the region in which they are offered. The State Register of Non-University Educational Centres (RCD) offers information on all non-university education and training providers by region, and on the field of studies and type of learning they offer (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022). Further, there is information online on the Europass supplements of art qualifications, on art qualifications at levels 6 and 7 and on sport qualifications (General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024).

6.6. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

MECU was adopted in 2022, and it needs time to be implemented before conducting an evaluation (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022).

Referencing to the EQF

MECES has been self-certified against the QF-EHEA (Ministry of Education, Culture & Sport, 2014). The referencing report of the MECU to the EQF was endorsed by the EQF Advisory Group in 2024.

Important lessons and future plans

The adoption of MECU through Royal Decree 272/2022 and its referencing to the EQF are major milestones in the development and implementation process of the framework. MECU has incorporated MECES and has improved the transparency and comparability of qualifications by providing a comprehensive map of formal qualifications. The framework is adequately embedded into national legislation through the organic laws on education and vocational training, while the royal decree links it to validation. MECU has provided a platform that has promoted cooperation among various stakeholders, including labour market representatives. EQF is used in the recognition of foreign qualifications ([9]).

The dissemination of the framework is a major challenge and priority, as it is considered essential to increase the awareness and use of the MECU across all competent bodies and end users. Other priorities include updating the Europass supplements, developing instruments, such as the European Leaning Model (ELM) to promote comparability, transparency and portability of qualifications and supporting the automatic recognition of VET qualifications (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024).

Plans include levelling non-formal and informal qualifications to MECU in a future phase of its implementation (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022). Another future aim of the MECU is to further support recognition of foreign qualifications, promoting cross-border mobility of learners and workers across EU, easing the integration of third-country nationals into the Spanish labour market and contributing to the internationalisation of the country's education and training system (General Secretariat for Vocational Training, 2024).

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 7/4/2025]

General Secretariat for VET.

MECU.

Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales (National Catalogue of Occupational Standards).

Repertorio Nacional de Certificados de Profesionalidad (National Repertoire of Professional Certificates).

General Secretariat for Vocational Training. (2024). *Spanish report on the referencing of the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (MECU) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)*

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	**Doctoral degree (Título de Doctor)** **Category** Third cycle	8
7	**Master's degree (Título de Máster universitario)** **Category** Second cycle	7
	Master's degree in artistic education (Título de Máster en Enseñanzas Artísticas) **Category** Second cycle	
	Bachelor's degree of at least 300 ECTS credits comprising at least 60 ECTS credits at master's level, obtaining the level of qualification through the Council of Universities (Título de Graduado de al menos 300 créditos ECTS que comprenda al menos 60 créditos ECTS de Nivel de Máster, que haya obtenido este nivel de cualificación mediante resolución del Consejo de Universidades) **Category** Second cycle	
6	**Bachelor's degree (Título de Graduado)** **Category** First cycle	6
	Advanced degree in higher artistic education (Título Superior de la Enseñanzas Artísticas Superiores) **Category** First cycle	

5	**A - Higher technician diploma (Técnico Superior de Formación Profesional – Grado D)**	5
	Category	
	Short cycle	
	A - Higher sports technician diploma (Título de Técnico Superior Deportivo)	
	Category	
	Short cycle	
	A - Higher technician in visual arts and design diploma (Título de Técnico Superior de Artes Plásticas y Diseño)	
	Category	
	Short cycle	
	B - Professional certificate level3 (Certificado de Profesionalidad nivel 3 – Grado C)	
	Category	
	Short cycle	
	C - VET specialisation courses for higher (Cursos de especialización técnico superior – Grado E)	
	Category	
	Short cycle	

4	A - Baccalaureate degree (Título de Bachiller)	4
	A - Professional technician's degree (Título de Técnico de Formación Profesional)	
	A - Professional music teaching technician's degree – Grado D (Título de Técnico de Enseñanzas Profesionales de Música)	
	A - Professional dance teaching technician's degree (Título de Técnico de Enseñanzas Profesionales de Danza)	
	A - Visual arts and design technician's degree (Título de Técnico de Artes Plásticas y Diseño)	
	A - Degree of Technician in Sports (Título de Técnico Deportivo)	
	B - Professional Certificate level 2 (Certificado de Profesionalidad nivel 2 – Grado C)	
	C - Specialization courses in vocational training of the educational system that requires holding a Degree of Professional Technician (Cursos de Especialización de Formación Profesional del sistema educativo cuyo requisito de acceso sea estar en posesión de un título de Técnico de Formación Profesional – Grado E)	
3	A - Graduate Degree in Compulsory Secondary Education (Título de graduado en Educación Secundaria Obligatoria)	3
	A - Basic Professional Technician Degree (Título de Técnico Profesional Básico – Grado D)	
	B - Professional Certificate level 1 (Certificado de Profesionalidad nivel 1 – Grado C)	

2	**Official certificate of passing the second year of compulsory secondary education (Certificado oficial de superación de 2.º de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria)** **Certificate of vocational training programmes for pupils with special educational needs or other vulnerable groups, regulated under the provisions of Royal Decree 127/2014 (Certificado de programas formativos de formación profesional para alumnos y alumnas con necesidades educativas especiales o colectivos específicos, regulados al amparo de la disposición adicional cuarta del Real Decreto 127/2014, de 28 de febrero)**	2
1	**Certification of primary education (Certificación correspondiente a la enseñanza primaria)**	1

Acronyms

EQF	European qualifications framework
MECU	Marco Español de Cualificaciones (Spanish qualifications framework)
MECES	Marco Español de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior (Spanish qualifications framework for higher education)
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area
VET	vocational education and training

References

[URLs accessed 7/4/2025]

Cedefop. (2023). *Microcredentials for labour market education and training: Microcredentials and evolving qualifications systems.* Publications Office of the European Union.

Cedefop & ReferNet (2024). *Timeline of VET policies in Europe* [online tool].

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General Secretariat for Vocational Training. (2024). *Spanish report on the referencing of the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (MECU) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).*

Gonzalez-Yubero, J. (2024). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update: Spain*. European Commission & Cedefop.

Ministry of Education, Culture & Sport. (2014). *Informe sobre la Autocertificación del Marco Español para las Cualificaciones de la Educación Superior* (*MECES*) [Verification of compatibility of the Spanish qualifications framework for higher education) with the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area].

Notes

[1]Sublevel 4A also includes the baccalaureate degree (TÃtulo de Bachiller).
[2]Source: Internal communication with the General Secretariat for VET.
[3]VET currently includes microcrendentials, professional certificates, intermediate and higher tertiary programmes (Source: Internal communication with the General Secretariat for VET).
[4]Source: Internal communication with the General Secretariat for VET.
[5]The central government is responsible for designing 65 % of the curriculum (55 % in those autonomous communities that have their own language). The remaining part of the curriculum at the regional level differs among autonomous communities.
[6]For most programmes, the identification of the intended learning outcomes was rather straightforward, due to the latest regulations, which introduced amendments to the curriculum.
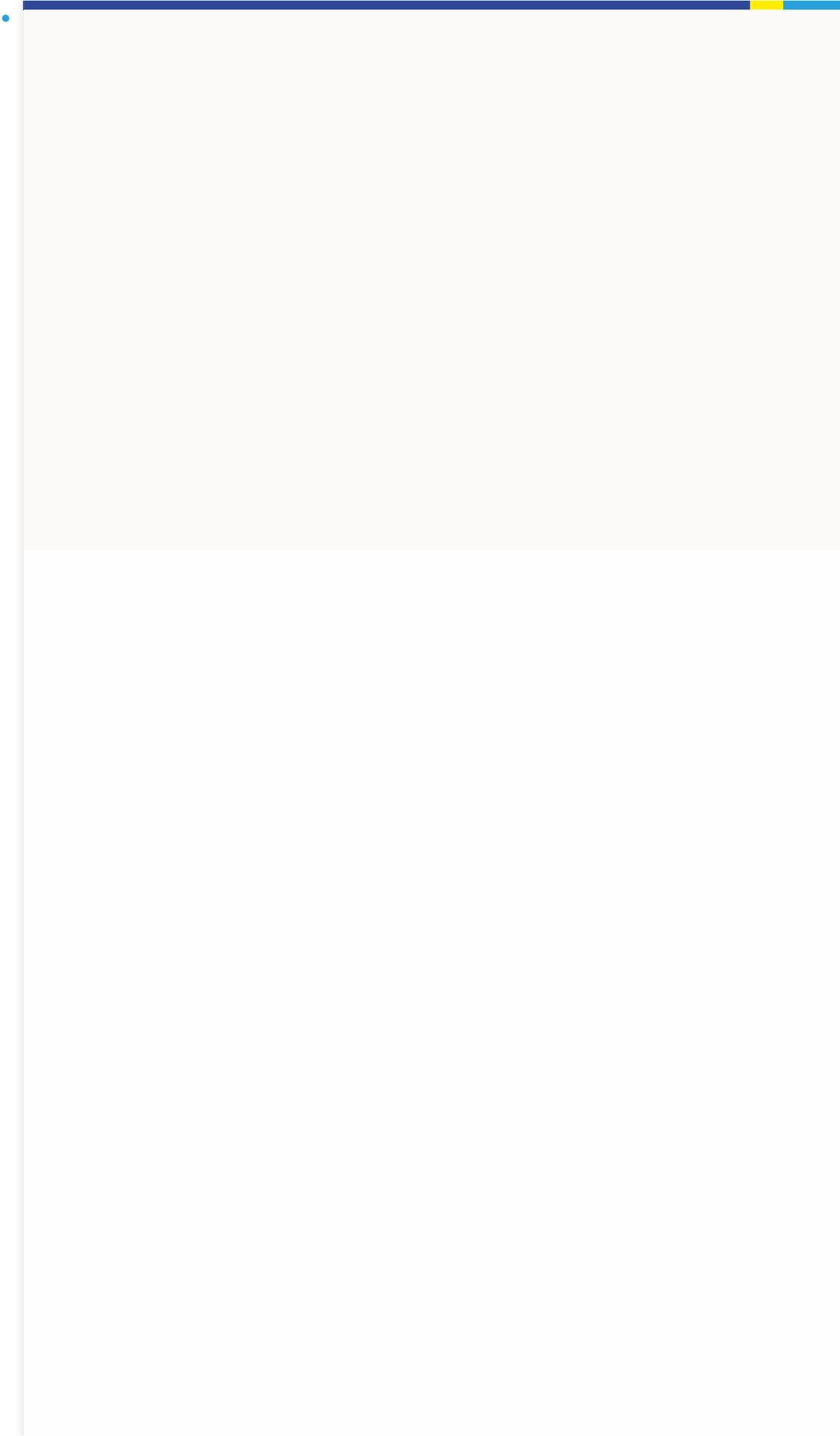[7]The learning outcomes of a qualification should completely correspond to the level descriptors of a given MECU level.
[8]The learning outcomes of a qualification fit better with the level descriptors of a given MECU level than with those of other levels.
[9]Source: Internal communication with the General Secretariat for VET.

Related content

Spain – European inventory of NQFs 2024

European inventory of NQF

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