

# SPAIN

## European inventory on NQF 2014

### Introduction

Spain has developed its qualifications framework for lifelong learning (ESQF) known as Spanish qualifications framework (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones*) (MECU). It is based on learning outcomes and aims to link and coordinate different education and training subsystems. The framework will include qualifications obtained in compulsory, post-secondary and higher education, and will integrate validation of non-formal and informal learning processes.

The Royal decree on the introduction of MECU is the legal basis for its implementation, although this decree has yet to come into force. It defines levels and level descriptors for referencing the MECU to the EQF levels. It was developed in consultation with main stakeholders and supervised by the national advisory bodies.

The higher four levels of MECU will be linked to the qualifications framework for higher education (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior*) (MECES), which has been put in place separately <sup>(1)</sup>.

### Main policy objectives

One of the main objectives of developing an ESQF compatible with the European qualifications framework (EQF) and those in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) is to make Spanish qualifications easier to understand by describing them in terms of learning outcomes; it should also clarify relations between them. It is expected that this will improve the extent to which stakeholders are informed about national qualifications, raising trust and making mobility easier. The ESQF aims to support lifelong learning, link initial vocational education and training (IVET) and continuing VET, and improve access and participation for everyone, including the disadvantaged. Through the ESQF – it is expected – it will be easier to identify, validate and recognise all kinds of learning outcomes (including non-formal and informal learning), regardless of the way they were acquired. It will support better use of qualifications at national and European level.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Established by the Royal Decree 1027/211  
<http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2011/08/03/pdfs/BOE-A-2011-13317.pdf> [accessed 16.10.2014].

Developments take into account experiences with occupational standards. Of special attention and lively discussion are levels 3 and 4 of the national qualifications framework (NQF), where formal vocational qualifications/titles, regulated by the Ministry of Education, and professional qualifications/certificates, under the remit of Ministry of Labour, would be assigned. They are different in the learning they represent, but can be linked to the same level of the catalogue.

Another important aim is to support transition and progression possibilities within the various subsystems of education and vocational training; examples include progression from short cycle to university programmes and opening up higher education for non-traditional learners, who might have no school leaving certificate. Another challenge is to put procedures in place for recognising non-formal learning and to reduce early school leaving (18 to 24 age group) (European Commission, 2013, pp.144-148) <sup>(2)</sup>.

The MECU should also have an important communication role for diverse stakeholders.

## Stakeholder involvement

The Ministry of Education, Directorate General for Vocational Training, is coordinating NQF development and implementation in cooperation with other ministries (employment and social security, industry, energy and tourism, health, social services and equality, economy and competitiveness). The development work includes a wide range of other stakeholders such as social partners (unions, Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organisations, Spanish Confederation of Small and Medium Enterprises), institutional coordination bodies (such as Sectoral Conference of Education, General Conference for University Policy), consultative bodies (State School Council, Vocational Training Council, Arts Education Council, University Council), agencies for evaluation and others (professional corporations and associations). Regional councils for education have been involved in the process. Spain is seeking to create a simple and practical system that is robust, but also flexible enough to respond to the requirements of regional autonomy. However, it is important to note that overall responsibility for the development and implementation of the MECU, in accordance with the Spanish Constitution, lies with the central government. The

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<sup>(2)</sup> Despite the reduction from 31.2% in 2009 to 24.9% in 2012, the early school leaving rate is above the EU average (12.7%) with big regional disparities.

state has exclusive competence on all regulation of qualifications (an aspect correspondingly developed and revised by the 2006 and the 2013 Organic Acts).

Cooperation with the Ministry of Employment and Social Security has been reinforced recently to address high unemployment in the country.

Cooperation with the Bologna process is ensured with members represented in both the committee for MECU and in the group for MECES to achieve methodological and structural coherence, making possible the alignment of the two frameworks.

## Framework implementation

The framework is not yet operational. The Royal Decree on the introduction of MECU will establish the legal basis for its implementation but this has yet to come into force. The draft Royal Decree recommends establishing a MECU committee, including stakeholders such as ministries, representatives of professional associations, trade union and business representatives and qualifications framework experts from different sectors. The committee will be mandated to decide on assignment of framework levels to the Spanish qualifications and to submit proposals to the government for approval. The national qualifications will be assigned to MECU levels based on three criteria:

- (a) comparability of qualifications type descriptors defined in learning outcomes and the MECU level descriptors;
- (b) implementation of the common quality assurance in higher education and in VET, in line with annex III of the EQF Recommendation;
- (c) public consultation with bodies involved in design, award and use of qualifications in a respective field.

Qualifications from formal education and training will be assigned first; no major challenges are expected. More challenging is the inclusion of qualifications resulting from validation of non-formal or informal learning. These processes are more recent and consolidated experiences are still weak.

## Level descriptors and learning outcomes

An eight-level framework has been proposed to cover all main types of Spanish qualification. The four highest levels are compatible with the Spanish qualifications framework for higher education, which is based on the Dublin descriptors.

Level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. They have been inspired by EQF level descriptors, but adopted to suit the national context. This is particularly the case for skills, where the ability to communicate in different languages and analytical skills are emphasised. Competence is defined as autonomy and responsibility, including learning skills and attitudes.

Broad generic descriptors for the NQF will be supplemented with more detailed descriptors when necessary, such as for academic qualifications.

The learning outcomes approach is seen as an essential part of MECU and MECES development and implementation. However, as reported for the Cedefop study on learning outcomes (Cedefop, forthcoming), the notion of learning outcomes is a new concept in the Spanish context and not widely shared. Competences and capacities are often referred to in various policy documents, with many different interpretations due to various linguistic and pedagogic concepts. The level of implementation also varies across subsystems; the most developed and elaborated is in VET. It is expected that the development of both MECU and MECES will further support the strengthening of learning outcomes at all education and qualification levels to make qualifications more readable and easier to compare. A new Organic Law 8/2013 has been recently adopted (Government of Spain, 2013), aiming to improve quality and promote lifelong learning, mobility and coherence of the nation system in line with international standards. Framework curricula should include 'the standard and measurable learning outcomes'.

To develop a common approach, the Ministry of Education and Science has established in the legislation, national core curricula for the various levels of education: pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and vocational training. These are determined by central government <sup>(3)</sup>, though schools can take responsibility for developing part of their own curriculum. The core curricula determine the general objectives for each stage of education as well as specific objectives for each area or subject. They also establish the content and evaluation criteria for each area and the basic skills for each stage of compulsory education.

The VET qualification system is defined by the Law on Qualifications and Vocational Training (Government of Spain, 2002). Professional modules for each qualification gather the learning outcomes and the corresponding assessment

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<sup>(3)</sup> Central government is responsible for designing 65% of the curriculum (55% in those autonomous communities which have their own language); the additional curriculum at regional level differs between autonomous communities.

criteria that show that the qualification holder knows, understands and is able to do as expected on completion of the programme. Learning outcomes are closely related to work activities and required professional competences.

New study programmes in higher education have to include expected outcomes and achievement of learning objectives set for the student. All study programmes have to be accredited according to national guidelines.

## Validating non-formal and informal learning and links to the NQF <sup>(4)</sup>

Spain does not have a comprehensive national strategy for validation; different laws frame validation, targeting different education sectors. The Organic Law of Education and the Organic Law of Universities incorporate actions to validate non-formal and informal learning, such as access exams to VET and university studies aimed at those people who do not have the required qualifications. Royal Decree 1224/2009 (Government of Spain, 2009) established recognition of skills acquired through work experience. This decree provides the possibility of evaluating professional competences through non-traditional assessment methods; this is common to gaining qualifications from the employment administration (*certificados de profesionalidad*) and the education administration (IVET programmes) through specific calls for validation. The procedure only validates professional competences acquired through work experience or non-formal learning pertaining to specific units of competences registered in the national catalogue of professional qualifications. The calls for validation and accreditation of professional competences are usually restricted to selected economic sectors, depending on available financial resources and sector needs.

Other degrees regulate access to formal qualifications through tests. Since the 1970s, those over 25 can access university upon satisfactory performance of 'over-25' access exams, but without a qualification in post-compulsory upper secondary education. Adults can also gain the diploma of compulsory secondary education and the baccalaureate diploma (post-compulsory upper secondary education) through examinations, without having undertaken the corresponding formal studies.

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<sup>(4)</sup> This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al., 2014.

## Referencing to the EQF

The draft referencing report is expected to be prepared by the end of 2014. The self-certification report has been drafted. Spain has not yet decided whether there will be one joint report prepared to reference to the EQF and self-certify to the QH-EHEA.

## Important lessons and future plans

There are challenges at different levels.

First, dialogue and interaction with, and developing trust among, different stakeholders from education and employment is considered a cornerstone and key success factor for the development and implementation of a comprehensive NQF.

Second, including VET qualifications, especially at levels 3 and 4, seems to be a challenge because VET qualifications at these levels are not only awarded by different bodies (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour), but are of different nature, workload, delivery and quality assurance mechanisms, some of them less regulated. There seem to be less confidence and trust in the ways these qualifications can be mapped together. Putting the framework into the lifelong learning perspective and including non-formal and informal aspects of learning in the framework is regarded as complex. Including qualifications resulting from non-formal or informal learning uses recognition and validation processes widely implemented only in recent years.

NQF development in Spain also shows the importance of political processes and cycle on the implementation of European tools, such as the EQF. Adoption of the Royal Decree on MECU is an important step towards the MECU implementation.

### **Main sources of information**

[URLs accessed 16.10.2014]

The Ministry of Education is the main source of information on NQF development, (MECU and MECES), also for all formal qualifications, including VET diplomas:

<http://www.educacion.es/portada.html>

The Directorate General for Vocational Training has been designated the national contact point.

The MECU website: [www.mecd.gob.es/mecu](http://www.mecd.gob.es/mecu)

Table 1 **Spanish national qualifications framework (draft)**

EQF	ESQF/MECU	ESQF-EHEA/MECES	QF-EHEA
8	8	Doctorado	Third cycle
7	7	Master	Second cycle
6	6	Grado	First cycle
5	5	Técnico superior	First cycle
4	4	–	
3	3	–	
2	2	–	
1	1	–	

Source: Royal decree on the MECU (draft).

## List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
ESQF	Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning
IVET	initial vocational education and training
NQF	national qualifications framework
MECU	Marco Español de Cualificaciones [Spanish qualifications framework]
MECES	Marco Español de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior [qualifications framework for higher education]
QF-EHEA	qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area
VET	vocational education and training

## References

[URLs accessed 16.10.2014]

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