

SPAIN

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Under significant fiscal pressure, Spain is struggling to finance an effective and equitable skills system ⁽¹⁾. The country has increased its education budget since 2015, but the previous accumulated financial constraints have reduced equity in education, and the effectiveness of education spending remains an issue (European Commission, 2016). General government expenditure on education was among the lowest in the EU in 2014, as a proportion both of GDP (4.1%) and of total general government expenditure (9.1%). Spain's early school leaving rate has continued to fall, from 21.9% in 2014 to 20% in 2015 but it is still the highest in the EU, and above the national Europe 2020 target of 15% (European Commission, 2016).

Spain has developed its qualifications framework for lifelong learning, known as the 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 European qualifications framework (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 ⁽²⁾. This framework

⁽¹⁾ The OECD identified 12 skills challenges for Spain across education, employment, research, social, growth and fiscal policies, all interlinked (OECD 2015a).

⁽²⁾ Established under Royal Decree: Ministry of Education (2011). Real Decreto 1027/2011, de 15 julio, por el que se establece el Marco Español de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior [Royal Decree 2027/2011, of 15 July, for the establishment of the Spanish qualifications framework for Higher Education]: <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2011/08/03/pdfs/BOE-A-2011-13317.pdf>

has been self-certified against the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area (FQ-EHEA) as part of Spain's continuing commitment to the Bologna process. The self-certification followed the procedures and criteria set down for such work within the Bologna process, and involved a committee of senior Spanish and international experts and stakeholders.

Policy objectives

One of the main objectives in developing a national framework 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 MECU aims to support lifelong learning, including qualifications acquired through formal education, but also integrating validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission et al., forthcoming). It also aims to link initial vocational education and training (IVET) and continuing VET, and improve access and participation for everyone, including the disadvantaged. Adult participation in lifelong learning stood at 9.8% in 2014 and 9.9% in 2015, slightly below the EU average of 10.7% (European Commission, 2016).

Through the MECU it should 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. Developments take into account experiences with occupational standards. Of special attention and lively discussion are levels 3 and 4 of the national qualifications framework, 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. The MECU should also have an important communication role for diverse stakeholders.

The purpose of the Spanish qualifications framework for higher education (MECES) is to allow the classification, comparability and transparency of higher

education qualifications within the Spanish education system. The levels within MECES are labelled 1 to 4 and correspond to the four levels of the FQ-EHEA: *técnico superior* (advanced VET), *grado* (bachelor), *master* (master) and *doctor* (doctorate). Of these, the first is a non-university higher education level included to support and promote lifelong learning. Some advanced vocational education and training (VET) is considered higher education (HE) but is undertaken outside the university system; such advanced VET studies may be recognised not only for admission to university but also as ECTS credits where subjects/learning outcomes are properly aligned.

Levels and use of 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, 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.

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 law for the improvement of the quality of education has been adopted ⁽³⁾, aiming to improve quality and promote lifelong learning, mobility and coherence of the national system in line with international standards. Framework curricula should include 'the standard and measurable learning outcomes'.

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, 2016), the notion of learning outcomes is a new concept in the Spanish context and not widely shared. Competences and

⁽³⁾ Government of Spain (2013). Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la mejora de la calidad educativa [Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, for the improvement on the quality of education]. *Boletín oficial del estado*, No 295. <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2013/12/10/pdfs/BOE-A-2013-12886.pdf>

capacities are often referred to in 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. The VET qualification system is defined by the Law on qualifications and vocational training ⁽⁴⁾ that establishes the national catalogue of professional qualifications. Professional modules for each qualification gather the learning outcomes and the corresponding assessment 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.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport has established in 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 ⁽⁵⁾, 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

New higher education study programmes 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. MECES refers directly to learning outcomes (*resultados de aprendizaje* and *competencias*). Linked to MECES levels, learning outcomes are a specific requirement in, for example, the ex-post external evaluation of study programmes required for the formal *Acredita/Renovación de la acreditación* of all official degrees. Consideration of the use of learning outcomes is also a specific requirement in the external evaluation of a higher education institution's or unit's internal quality assurance systems within audit procedures.

⁽⁴⁾ Government of Spain (2002). Ley orgánica 5/2002, de 19 de junio, de las Cualificaciones y de la Formación Profesional [Organic Law 5/2002 on qualifications and vocational training]. *Boletín oficial del estado*, No 147.
<https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2002/06/20/pdfs/A22437-22442.pdf>

⁽⁵⁾ 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.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

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). 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. 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, overall responsibility for the development and implementation of the MECU, in accordance with the Spanish constitution, lies with central government. The State has exclusive competence on all regulation of qualifications, an aspect correspondingly developed and revised by the 2006 and the 2013 Organic Acts ⁽⁶⁾.

Cooperation with the Ministry of Employment and Social Security has been reinforced 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. MECES was formulated by a formal committee established under Royal Decree 900/2007 ⁽⁷⁾.

⁽⁶⁾ Organic Acts 2006 and 2013:

- Government of Spain (2006). Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación [Organic Law 2/2006, of 2 May 2006, on education]. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, No 106, 4 May 2006. <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2006/05/04/pdfs/A17158-17207.pdf>
- Government of Spain (2013). Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la mejora de la calidad educativa [Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, for the improvement of the quality of education]. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, No 295. <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2013/12/10/pdfs/BOE-A-2013-12886.pdf>

⁽⁷⁾ Government of Spain (2007). Real Decreto 900/2007, de 6 de julio, por el que se crea el Comité para la definición del Marco Español de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior [Royal Decree 900/2007, of 6 July, on the establishment of the

External quality assurance in higher education is undertaken by the national agency (ANECA) and a number of agencies within some of the autonomous regions. The competences of the quality assurance agencies vary depending on the procedures being undertaken and whether or not the agency is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) ⁽⁸⁾ and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) ⁽⁹⁾.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹⁰⁾

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 who do not have the required qualifications. Royal Decree 1224/2009 ⁽¹¹⁾ 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

Committee for the definition of the Spanish qualifications framework in higher education]: <http://secretariageneral.ugr.es/pages/normativa/fichasestatal/21mko/>

⁽⁸⁾ ENQA: <http://www.enqa.eu>

⁽⁹⁾ In addition to ANECA, five of the regional agencies (AQU-Catalunya in Catalonia, ACSUG in Galicia, ACSUCYL in Castilla y León, ACC-DEVA in Andalusia, and UNIBASQ for the Basque Country) are members of EQAR: <https://www.eqar.eu>

⁽¹⁰⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., 2016).

⁽¹¹⁾ Government of Spain (2009). Real Decreto 1224/2009, de 17 de julio, de reconocimiento de las competencias profesionales adquiridas por experiencia laboral [Royal Decree 1224/2009, of 17 July, on the recognition of professional competences acquired through working experience]. *Boletín oficial del estado*, No 205. <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2009/08/25/pdfs/BOE-A-2009-13781.pdf>

pertaining to specific units of competences registered in the national catalogue of professional qualifications.

Since 2009, awareness of validation has increased in all sectors of society and stakeholders have become more sensitive towards validation as a way of recognising learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, and through work experience. The concept of lifelong learning (LLL) has become more accepted by society and there is greater demand for it. The Spanish procedure of validation is clearly accepted among potential users, but it is generally considered that the efforts made are not enough to reach out to all possible beneficiaries and give them validation opportunities in line with the needs of the job market. In recent years, the topic of validation of non-formal and informal learning has been included in many policy documents. Validation processes, especially procedures of assessment and certification of professional skills acquired through work experience, are now clearly recognised in the VET plans of autonomous communities and institutional declarations for improving lifelong learning.

The needs of validation, and assessment and certification of professional skills, are also identified in some regional operational programmes. Extremadura, Andalusia, Canarias, Castilla-la Mancha and the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla recognise as a priority, promoting recognition of occupation competences acquired through work experience and their validation and accreditation, as well as promoting enhanced training to complete their qualification level.

Other degrees regulate access to formal qualifications through tests to obtain the title of Graduate in secondary education. The tests assess the degree of development of skills and competences equivalent to secondary education level. 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.

NQF 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.

As the MECU has not been referenced to the EQF, EQF levels are not indicated on the vocational qualifications, nor on Europass certificate supplements and diploma supplements. Universities in Spain are expected to make the diploma supplement (*Suplemento Europeo al Título* (SET)) available to graduates.

Referencing to the EQF

The qualifications framework for higher education (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones de Educación Superior* (MECES)) has been self-certified against the FQ-EHEA. The Spanish qualifications framework (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones* (MECU)) is planned to be referenced to the EQF in 2017.

Important lessons and future plans

Development of the Spanish national qualifications framework for lifelong learning aims to strengthen the links between education and employment but there are various challenges at different levels. 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. Government is taking initiatives to support cooperation between universities, businesses and research centres but university governance and financing systems do not create a favourable environment, so fostering cooperation remains a challenge (European

Commission, 2016a). The future of the 2013 Organic Law for improvement of the quality of education ⁽¹²⁾ is questioned and the reform of the teaching profession remains on hold.

Including VET qualifications, especially at levels 3 and 4, remains 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 which are less regulated. There seems 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.

Further application of MECES is an integral part of both external and internal quality assurance mechanisms undertaken within Spanish higher education, nationally and within the autonomous regions.

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 will be an important step towards implementation.

Further sources of information

[URLs accessed 16.11.2016]

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

The MECU website: www.mecd.gob.es/mecu

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport is the main source of information on NQF development, (MECU and MECES), also for all formal qualifications, including VET diplomas: <http://www.mecd.gob.es/educacion-mecd/mc/mecu/presentacion.html>

⁽¹²⁾ Government of Spain (2013). Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la mejora de la calidad educativa [Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, for the improvement on the quality of education]. *Boletín oficial del estado*, No 295. <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2013/12/10/pdfs/BOE-A-2013-12886.pdf>

Draft Spanish national qualifications framework (MECU)

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

Source: Adapted from the 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
MECU	<i>Marco Español de Cualificaciones</i> [Spanish qualifications framework]
MECES	<i>Marco Español de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior</i> [qualifications framework for higher education]
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area
VET	vocational education and training

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