

SPAIN

European inventory on NQF 2018

Introduction and context ⁽¹⁾

In recent years, Spain has taken a number of measures to reform and improve the quality and relevance of education and training. Important progress has been made in reducing early school leaving, which has fallen progressively (23.6 % in 2013, 20 % in 2015 and 18.3 % in 2017); however, rates still vary between regions and measures have been taken to reduce early leaving further as part of a national plan, including an alternative vocational education path at lower secondary level adopted in 2013. Overall participation in vocational education and training (VET) and the employment rate of recent VET graduates are below the EU averages. Measures to increase the attractiveness of VET have been taken as part of a reform in 2014 that is still under way; there are new initiatives on dual VET schemes, with harmonised criteria in all regional education administrations for the entrance exams for the three VET levels (basic, intermediate and higher VET). One persisting challenge in the country is the large disparity between regions, both in terms of skills and of participation in education and training. Grade repetition rates are still high and are not improving. National debate has been launched around a comprehensive reform and long-term legislative framework, the Social and political national pact on education. The 11 benchmarks proposed include updating the curricula and teaching methods, reforming the teaching profession, increasing school autonomy, and promoting digital skills and multilingualism. While the rate of tertiary education attainment is relatively high and above the EU average, the employment rate of recent tertiary graduates (ISCED levels 5-8), at 76.6% in 2017, has improved but is still lower than the EU average of 84.9%. The qualifications mismatch in Spain remains high and there are significant skills imbalances (European Commission, 2018).

In 2018, the Spanish Ministry of Education and VET, in cooperation with other stakeholders, concluded technical work on the design of the Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones*

⁽¹⁾ The Spanish NQF fiche will be further elaborated when the referencing to the EQF has been completed.

(MECU) ⁽²⁾. A royal decree is being drafted and is expected to be adopted in 2019.

The qualifications framework for higher education (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior* (MECES) has been put in place separately ⁽³⁾. This framework 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 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2014) ⁽⁴⁾. 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 qualifications awarded by different authorities in a lifelong learning perspective. It is expected that this will improve the extent to which stakeholders are informed about national qualifications, raising trust and making mobility easier. 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. This will support better use of qualifications at national and European level. 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

⁽²⁾ MECU: Spanish national qualifications framework for lifelong learning.
<http://www.mecd.gob.es/educacion-mecd/mc/mecu/presentacion.html>

⁽³⁾ 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 2011, for the establishment of the Spanish qualifications framework for higher education]. *Boletín oficial del estado*, No 185.

⁽⁴⁾ <http://www.aneca.es/Sala-de-prensa/Noticias/2014/Informe-sobre-la-Autocertificacion-del-Marco-Espanol-para-las-Cualificaciones-de-la-Educacion-Superior-MECES>

⁽⁵⁾ Based on draft MECU level descriptors [unpublished].

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.

The MECU aims to include, in a first stage, all nationally recognised diplomas and certificates from the education and labour ministries, while remaining open for inclusion of official qualifications issued by other administrative sectors.

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⁽⁵⁾. 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. The Spanish Ministry of Education and VET drafted a new education organic law in 2018⁽⁶⁾,

⁽⁵⁾ Based on draft MECU level descriptors [unpublished].

⁽⁶⁾ Updating and improving the previous law: 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 2013, for the improvement on the quality of education].

that will be submitted to Parliament in spring 2019. The law aims to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and increase school autonomy and the coherence of the national system in line with international standards.

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 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 one most developed and elaborated is in VET. The VET qualification system is defined by the Law on qualifications and vocational training ⁽⁷⁾ that establishes the national catalogue of professional qualifications ⁽⁸⁾ this lists 680 occupational standards defined in competences and is permanently updated. 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. Occupational standards inform development of IVET programmes that lead to vocational diplomas as well as CVET programmes leading to professional certificates (*certificados de profesionalidad*). Since 2014, dual VET – strengthening links to the labour market – has been implemented in all autonomous communities. Revising VET curricula and strengthening key competences has been initiated though the 2015 Ministerial Decree (EDC/65/2015). The Ministry of Education and VET is drafting a Royal decree to regulate the organisation of VET, including the admission criteria for the three levels of VET (basic, intermediate and higher) and other aspects.

The Ministry of Education and VET 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

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 (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>

⁽⁸⁾ <http://incual.mecd.es/bdc>

central government, though regional administrations, and the schools take responsibility for developing part of the curriculum ⁽⁹⁾. 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 during audit procedures.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The Ministry of Education and VET, Directorate General for Vocational Training, is coordinating MECU development in cooperation with other ministries (Labour, Migrations and Social Security, Industry, Trade and Tourism, Health, Consumption and Social Welfare, Economy and Business). 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

⁽⁹⁾ 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.

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 ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, Migrations and Social Security has been reinforced to address still 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 ⁽¹¹⁾.

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) ⁽¹²⁾ and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) ⁽¹³⁾.

⁽¹⁰⁾ 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 2013, 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>

⁽¹¹⁾ 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 2007, on the establishment of the Committee for the definition of the Spanish qualifications framework in higher education]: *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, No 172. <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2007/07/19/pdfs/A31371-31372.pdf>

⁽¹²⁾ ENQA: <http://www.enqa.eu>

⁽¹³⁾ In addition to ANECA, six of the regional agencies (AQU in Catalonia, ACPUA in Aragon, ACSUG in Galicia, ACSUCYL in Castilla y León, AAC-DEVA in Andalusia, and UNIBASQ for the Basque Country) are members of EQAR: <https://www.eqar.eu/register/agencies/>

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹⁴⁾

In recent years, the Spanish Government and regional governments have consolidated national procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning; different laws and regulations 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 ⁽¹⁵⁾ 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. Validation procedures lead either to full or partial qualifications, and/or give access to education and training programmes. Progress has been achieved in higher education; universities have developed procedures to validate and recognise working experience to access a study programmes (for people over 40 years of age) or gain credits toward a degree.

Awareness of validation has increased in all sectors of society in Spain and stakeholders have become more sensitive to validation as a way of recognising learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal contexts, and through work experience. Validation is now covered by the Spanish Strategy for employment activation 2017-20 and a project *Reconoce* is in process to cover validation in the entire youth sector.

⁽¹⁴⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

⁽¹⁵⁾ 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 2009 on the recognition of professional competences acquired through working experience]. *Boletín oficial del estado*, No 205. <https://www.boe.es/buscar/pdf/2009/BOE-A-2009-13781-consolidado.pdf>

The Spanish national qualifications framework (MECU) is under construction. Once it is in place, the current procedures acquired through non-formal and informal learning can be used to acquire a qualification or gain access to programmes and qualifications which will be linked to the framework.

NQF implementation

The MECU is not yet operational. The royal decree on the introduction of MECU – in preparation but yet to come into force – will establish the legal basis for its implementation. The draft Royal Decree on MECU planned to be adopted in 2019 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 qualification type descriptors defined in learning outcomes and the MECU level descriptors;
- (b) implementation of the common quality assurance criteria for qualification in line with annex IV of the 2017 EQF recommendation ⁽¹⁶⁾;
- (c) public consultation with bodies involved in the design, award and use of qualifications in a respective field.

Qualifications from formal education and training and from the employment administration (*certificados de profesionalidad*) will be assigned first.

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 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (2014)). MECU is planned to be referenced to the EQF in 2019.

⁽¹⁶⁾ <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ceead970-518f-11e7-a5ca-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Important lessons and future plans

Development of the Spanish national qualifications framework for lifelong learning (MECU) aims to strengthen the links between education and employment but there are various challenges at different levels. Dialogue and interaction with different stakeholders from education and employment needs to continue; involving administrations that provide and award qualifications in different sectors will be part of the implementation process of the MECU. Government is taking initiatives to support cooperation between universities, businesses and research centres.

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 more broadly 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 paving the way towards implementation.

Main sources of information:

[URLs accessed 8.3.2019]

- The Directorate General for Vocational Training (Ministry of Education and VET) is the designated EQF NCP: <http://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/ministerio.html>
- The MECU website: www.mecd.gob.es/mecu
- Qualifications in the education system can be found on the website of the Ministry of Education and VET: <http://www.mecd.gob.es/educacion-mecd/>
- Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales (CNCP): <http://incual.mecd.es/bdc>
- Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (2014). *Verification of compatibility of MECES (the Spanish qualifications framework for higher education) with the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area (FQ-EHEA)*. <http://www.aneca.es/Sala-de-prensa/Noticias/2014/Informe-sobre-la-Autocertificacion-del-Marco-Espanol-para-las-Cualificaciones-de-la-Educacion-Superior-MECES>

Spanish qualifications framework for higher education (MECES) and draft Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning (MECU) levels

Draft MECU levels	MECES levels	Higher education qualifications	QF-EHEA
8	4	<i>Doctoral degree (Doctorado)</i>	Third cycle
7	3	<i>Master degree (Master)</i>	Second cycle
6	2	<i>Bachelor degree (Grado)</i>	First cycle
5	1	<i>Advanced technician (Técnico superior)</i>	First cycle
4			
3			
2			
1			

Source: Adapted from the Royal Decree 1027/2011 of 15 July 2011 establishing the Spanish qualifications framework of higher education. <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2011/08/03/pdfs/BOE-A-2011-13317.pdf>

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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- European Commission (2018). *Education and training monitor 2018: Spain*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2018-spain_en.pdf
- European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory for validation of non-formal and informal learning: country report: Spain*.
- 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>
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