

NQF state of play



Spain 2020

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Overview

Stage of development: Design stage

NQF linked to EQF: ✗

Scope of the framework:

Designed as a comprehensive NQF for lifelong learning; will include all levels and types of qualification from formal education and training.

Number of levels:

Eight proposed

Legal basis/stage of development:

Royal Decree 1027 (2011) establishing the Spanish qualifications framework for higher education (MECES): levels 5-8 (in Spanish)

NQF/EQF website:

[Website](#)

Qualifications register/database:

[Qualifications in the formal education system](#)

[The National repertoire of professional certificates](#)

Introduction and context

[1]

In recent years, Spain has focused on digital education as the pandemic crisis revealed a socioeconomic divide in students' access to digital technology. The national education curriculum includes digital competences, either as a compulsory separate subject in upper secondary education (including VET) or in other compulsory subjects in primary and lower secondary education. The Digitalisation and digital competence development plan (*Plan de digitalización y desarrollo de la competencia digital*) ([2]) together with the 2020 digital education plan (*Educa en Digital*) try to address digital gaps among students, teachers and schools. Although the digital competences of students are improving, they have lower confidence (in data literacy and digital content creation, problem solving and safety) than the EU average in lower and upper secondary education, and use of digital means for teaching is limited ([3]) (European Commission, 2019).

The new education law, in effect since January 2021 ([4]), not only aims to adapt the education system to digital advances but also improve access to, and the quality of, education, especially because students' educational outcomes have not improved ([5]) and regional differences persist. Another aim is to give schools further flexibility on curriculum content and put greater focus on competence-based learning. The early school leaving rate has fallen progressively in recent years (23.6% in 2013, 20% in 2015, 18.3% in 2017, 17.3% in 2019), but rates still vary between regions and progress has slowed. Overall participation in vocational education and training (VET) ([6]) remains low and the employment rate of recent VET graduates (70.0% in 2018 to 66.0% in 2019), continues to be below the EU average of 79.1%. VET graduate tracking is under development, with the creation of an integrated information and monitoring system, coordinated by the State Public Employment Service (SEPE). Measures to increase the attractiveness of VET and continue VET online have been taken as a response to the Covid-19 crisis. From January 2020, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training has been responsible for all VET regulation, including initial and continuous VET ([7]). 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 (29% in Spain; EU average 13%) (MEFP, 2019) and are not improving. While the rate of

tertiary education attainment is one of the highest among EU countries (44.7%), and above the EU average of 40.3%, graduates are very often interested in fields which are not in demand in the labour market. The employment rate of recent graduates (ISCED 3-8, total) at 73.0% in 2019, has improved but is still lower than the EU average of 80.9%. Qualifications mismatch in Spain remains high and there are significant skills imbalances (European Commission, 2020).

Spain has been developing the Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones*, MECU) ([8]). A royal decree setting the legal basis for implementation is pending and is expected to be adopted in 2021. A qualifications framework for higher education (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones para la Educación Superior*, MECES) has been put in place separately and self-certified against the QF-EHEA in 2014 ([9]) as part of Spain's continuing commitment to the Bologna process (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2014) ([10]).

Policy objectives

The MECU is envisaged primarily as a communication and information instrument. One of its main objectives is to make Spanish qualifications easier to understand by describing them in terms of learning outcomes, clarifying relationships between them, and indicating the qualification level on certificates and diplomas. It aims to promote and improve access to, and participation in, lifelong learning, to promote the recognition of qualifications and to facilitate comparability within Spain and Europe. The framework is expected to raise trust in Spanish qualifications and make mobility of learners and workers easier.

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 aims to include, all nationally recognised diplomas and certificates from formal education and training while remaining open for inclusion of official qualifications issued by other administrative sectors.

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 cycles of the FQ-EHEA ([11]) *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, learning outcomes and qualifications

The draft comprehensive framework is based on learning outcomes and has eight levels, with descriptors defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence ([12]). 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. The four highest levels are compatible with the Spanish qualifications framework for higher education, based on the level descriptors of cycles for QF-EHEA.

Once the legal basis is in place, the framework is expected to include qualifications awarded at all levels in the formal education system and will also integrate qualifications obtained through validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Spanish Council of Ministers approved a new education organic law in 2020, which became effective in 2021 ([13]), repealing the 2013 Organic Law for the improvement of quality of education (LOMCE) ([14]). The law (as can be seen below) aims to improve the quality of teaching and learning, promote equity and excellence and increase school autonomy and the coherence of the national system in line with international standards.

The level of implementation of learning outcomes varies across subsystems. The Ministry of Education and VET (previously Education, Culture and Sports) 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, though regional administrations, and the schools take responsibility for developing part of the curriculum ([15]). 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 [National Institute for Educational Evaluation](#) is the body of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training responsible for evaluation of the Spanish education system, in collaboration with the education authorities.

The most developed and elaborated implementation of learning outcomes is in VET. The VET qualification system is defined by the law on

qualifications and vocational training ([16]) that establishes the *National catalogue of professional qualifications* (*Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales*, CNCP) ([17]). It lists 680 occupational standards ([18]) defined in competences and is continually updated ([19]). 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 ([20]). At the end of 2019 the Council of Ministers approved the First strategic plan for vocational training of the educational system 2019-22 ([21]) aiming at having an updated national qualification catalogue (with companies taking a major role in the design of occupational standards) and a widespread training offer ([22]). The National Institute of Qualifications (INCUAL), which is responsible for defining, updating and adapting the national catalogue, focused in 2019 on designing the new occupational standards ([23]) and redefining learning outcomes. The 2020 organic law on education is another important boost to vocational training as it aims to improve social recognition, make vocational training more flexible, and move towards an integrated system of initial and continuous VET, accessible and with a lifelong learning perspective ([24]). The law sets the framework for reform of the curriculum towards a more competence-based approach. In addition, according to the law, students who pass a basic VET programme ([25]) will receive the ESO (compulsory secondary education) graduate degree, which will allow them access to upper secondary education. Therefore, basic VET programmes integrate general and vocational subjects. For those over the age of 17 – who left the education system without a qualification – vocational programmes are organised to allow them to obtain a general education certificate or technician qualification. Integrated vocational training and dual vocational training centres are also promoted with the new law ([26]).

The new educational law of 2021 has also introduced changes in the 2001 Organic Law on universities ([27]), on university admission exams ([28]) and access to higher VET programmes ([29]). Higher education study programmes must 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 *Acreditación/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 or

unit's internal quality assurance systems during audit procedures.

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](#)) and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) ([\[30\]](#)).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Ministry of Education and VET, Directorate General for Vocational Training, (through the General Secretariat for Vocational Training) has overall responsibility for developing and implementing the Spanish framework for lifelong learning (MECU). A wide range of stakeholders were involved and consulted in the development phase: other ministries (Labour, Migrations and Social Security, Industry, Trade and Tourism, Health, Consumption and Social Welfare, Economy and Business), 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 (such as State School Council, Vocational Training Council, Arts Education Council, University Council), agencies for evaluation, professional associations and regional councils for education. From January 2020, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training has been responsible for the whole VET regulation, including initial and continuous VET ([31]).

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. In 2020, the Sectoral Education Conference of the National System of Qualifications and Vocational Training for Employment was set up, together with the regional authorities from the autonomous communities ([32]). This is the new body for cooperation between the General State Administration and the autonomous communities to coordinate policies on vocational training for employment (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2021).

Cooperation with the Bologna process is ensured, with members represented in both the committee for MECU and in the group for MECES ([33]) to achieve methodological and structural coherence, making possible the alignment of the two frameworks ([34]).

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

[35]

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 new organic law on Education, in effect since 2021, 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 ([36]) which is currently being revised ([37]) established the procedure for the validation and recognition of professional competences acquired by work experience and non-formal training; this is common to gaining qualifications previously from the employment administration (*certificados de profesionalidad*) and now from the education administration through specific calls for validation ([38]).

Validation has been emphasised in different recent strategies, covered by the Spanish strategy for employment activation 2017-20 ([39]) and the 2018 VET national strategy ([40]). The latter focuses on the revision of the procedure for the recognition of professional competences and its simplification by making it more accessible through permanent open calls. The *Reconoce* project ([41]), approved in 2017 by the Spanish Youth Institute (INJUVE) and the youth departments of the autonomous communities, created a new recognition system for non-formal education, covering the youth sector in the country. In addition, the validation of skills acquired through non-formal, informal, or work experience is one of the 11 strategic lines included in the 2020 plan for the modernisation of vocational training ([42]) (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2021). One of the actions of this plan was the approval of a 2021 royal decree ([43]) that establishes a cumulative accreditation system so that the beneficiary can complete the training that leads to obtaining the corresponding professional training title or professional certificate (*certificados de profesionalidad*) ([44]). In February 2020, the one-off report for validation of non-formal and informal learning of Spain was also presented to the EQF advisory group (Ministry of Education and VET, 2020)

Progress has been achieved in higher education; universities have

developed procedures to validate and recognise working experience to access 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. Once the Spanish national qualifications framework for lifelong learning (MECU) is in place, the competences 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 and impact

Technical work on the design of the framework was completed in 2018. The royal decree setting the legal basis for implementation is pending and it is expected to be adopted in 2021. Once the legal basis is in place, qualifications from formal education and training, and previously from the employment administration (*certificados de profesionalidad*), will be given priority. A MECU committee will be established, including stakeholders such as ministries, representatives of professional associations, trade union and business representatives, and qualifications framework experts from different sectors. The committee will have the mandate to decide on assignment of framework levels to the Spanish qualifications and to submit proposals to the government for approval (Cedefop, 2020).

Qualifications in higher education are being designed taking into account compatibility between the two frameworks and linking the highest four MECU qualification levels to MECES, as it is a more advanced framework.

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 ([45]);
- c. public consultation with bodies involved in the design, award and use of qualifications in a relevant field.

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

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 2021.

Important lessons and future plans

Development of the Spanish national qualifications framework for lifelong learning (MECU), including all levels and types of qualifications, aims to strengthen the links between different parts of qualification system and between education and employment, but there are various challenges at different levels. Links between the two frameworks, MECES and MECU, need to be established. Dialogue and interaction with different stakeholders from education and employment has to continue; involving administrations that provide and award qualifications in different sectors will be part of the MECU implementation process. Government is taking initiatives to support cooperation between universities, businesses and research centres. The new institutional structure with the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MEFP) undertaking in 2020 all responsibilities also related to vocational training for employment (through the new General Secretariat for Vocational Training) aims to promote vocational training and to create a system that brings together initial and continuous vocational training.

The First strategic plan for vocational training in the education system for 2019-22 was an important development towards lifelong learning; it aimed to improve VET standards and make VET more attractive to young people by introducing flexible learning paths in secondary education and developing new programmes to meet the demands of the future of work (Cedefop, forthcoming). The new 2020 Education law also aims to improve the vocational training system in the country. However, 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.

NQF development in Spain also shows the importance of political processes, governance structures 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 1.4.2021]

- The General Secretariat for Vocational Education and Training (Ministry of Education and VET) is the designated EQF NCP:
<http://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/ministerio.html>
- MECU website: <http://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/mc/mecu/mecu.html>
- The National Catalogue of Occupational/Professional Standards (Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales - CNCP):
<https://incual.educacion.gob.es/bdc>
- The National Repertoire of Professional Certificates (Repertorio Nacional de Certificados de Profesionalidad): <https://www.sepe.es/HomeSepe/que-es-el-sepe/comunicacion-institucional/publicaciones/publicaciones-oficiales/listado-pub-formacion/repertorio-certificados-profesionalidad.html>
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National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
Draft MECU levels 8 MECES levels 4	Doctoral degree (Doctorado) Spanish qualifications framework for higher education (MECES) and draft Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning (MECU) levels	No EQF level
Draft MECU levels 7 MECES levels 3	Master degree (Master) Spanish qualifications framework for higher education (MECES) and draft Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning (MECU) levels	No EQF level
Draft MECU levels 6 MECES levels 2	Bachelor degree (Grado) Spanish qualifications framework for higher education (MECES) and draft Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning (MECU) levels	No EQF level
Draft MECU levels 5 MECES levels 1	Advanced technician (Técnico superior) Spanish qualifications framework for higher education (MECES) and draft Spanish qualifications framework for lifelong learning (MECU) levels	No EQF level
Draft MECU levels 4	(not available)	No EQF level
Draft MECU levels 3	(not available)	No EQF level

Draft MECU levels 2	(not available) 	No EQF level
Draft MECU levels 1	(not available) 	No EQF level

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Related content

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Spain - European inventory of NQFs 2020

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