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# The Canary Islands and their School System

This chapter describes the regional context of the Canary Islands, provides an overview of the education system, and lists aspects of education policy which the review team was requested to look at more closely.



## ABOUT THE CANARY ISLANDS

The Canary Islands are an archipelago located out in the Atlantic, to the far south of Spain and just 67 miles from the coast of Morocco. Ever since the voyages of Columbus, the Islands have been a stopping-off point connecting Europe with Latin America, then North America, and more recently West Africa.

The Islands are a Spanish *autonomous community* and an *outermost region* of the European Union, consisting of seven major islands – (from largest to smallest in population terms) *Tenerife, Gran Canaria, Fuerteventura, Lanzarote, La Palma, La Gomera* and *El Hierro* – one minor island and several smaller uninhabited islets. The total population in 2007 was nearly 2 025 951, of which 815 379 lived in Gran Canaria and 865 070 in Tenerife. The Islands are divided into two provinces based in Las Palmas and Santa Cruz de Tenerife, and there is some history of rivalry between them. The status of capital city is shared by Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

The Islands have a sub-tropical climate, with long hot days in summer and cooler days in winter. The archipelago's beaches, climate and important natural attractions – including four of Spain's national parks – make it a major tourist destination, with 10-12 million visitors per year, concentrated in Tenerife, Gran Canaria, Fuerteventura and Lanzarote. Services, including tourism, contributed 83% of the region's GDP in 2010, followed by construction 9%, industry 4%, energy 3% and agriculture 1%, though agriculture is more important than energy in terms of numbers employed (ISTAC, 2011). The government of the Canary Islands understands that the region needs to diversify its economic and employment base, and is seeking to develop new industries such as environmentally-friendly energy production.

The Canary Islands are one of Spain's less affluent regions. In 2008, the per capita income was 88% of the national average (Instituto de Evaluación, 2010a). On this measure it is by no means the poorest region – Galicia, Murcia, Andalucía, Castilla-La Mancha and Extremadura all rank lower – and its income growth between 2000 and 2008 broadly matched the national average. However since 2004, unemployment on the Islands has been higher than the Spanish average. In 2008 it was 17%, compared to 11% for Spain, and by 2010 it was 29%, the highest of all Spanish regions. Unemployment of young people aged 15-24 is even higher. In 2008, it was 32% compared to the Spanish average of 25%, and by 2010 it had risen to 52% – more than half of all young people – compared with 42% for Spain, 21% for all EU countries. Only Murcia, Ceuta and Melilla have higher youth unemployment (EUROSTAT, 2011).

Students in the Canary Islands tend to come from less advantaged family backgrounds than typical for Spain. In comparison to other regions in Spain, students in the Canary Islands participating in PISA 2009 reported one of the lowest levels of parents' educational and occupational status. Less than 5% of parents of Canary Islands students belong to the highest-status occupational group, and less than one-quarter of parents completed tertiary education. The mean socio-economic status of students in the Canary Islands was the lowest among all participating Spanish regions, 39% of Canary Islands students coming from a low socio-economic background<sup>1</sup> compared with 29% in Spain, 15% across the OECD.

## THE CANARY ISLANDS SCHOOL SYSTEM

Education in the Canary Islands is governed by Spanish law, specifically the Organic Law of Education of May 2006 (LOE), which came into force throughout Spain in the school year 2007/08. Responsibility for education resides with the Ministry for Education, Universities and Sustainability (*Consejería de Educación, Universidades y Sostenibilidad*) of the Autonomous Government.

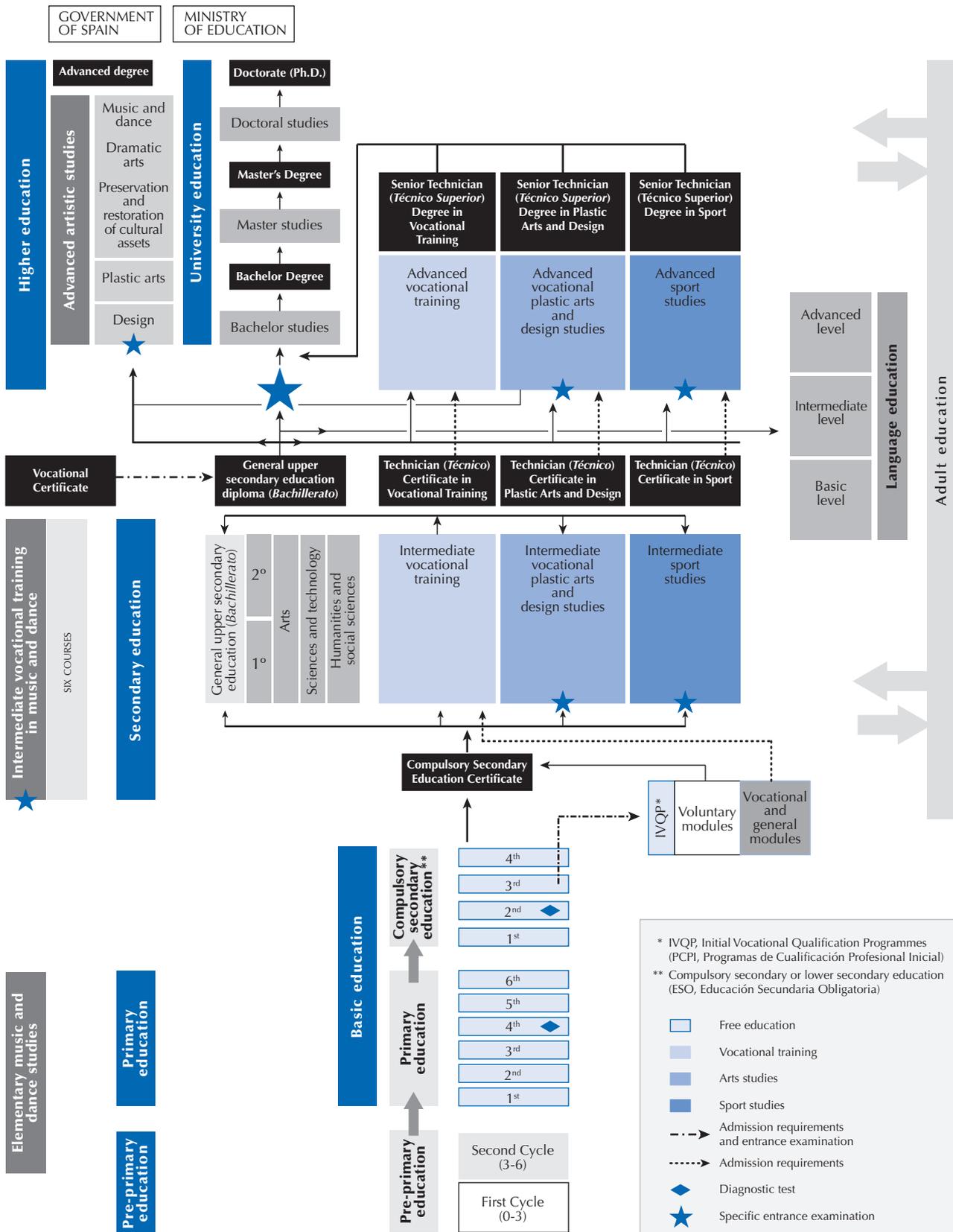
The **stages**, or phases, of school education in Spain are:

- **Infant** or pre-primary (0-6 years, non-compulsory).
- **Primary** (6-12 years).
- **Compulsory secondary** (12-16 years), known as ESO, at the end of which students hope to obtain their ESO graduation certificate. Those who do not, have the option of going on to vocational programmes to gain a professional certificate which may – depending on the path followed and length of study – equate to an ESO graduation certificate.
- **Upper secondary** (16-18 years), known as *Bachillerato* because at this age many young people are studying for the final school exam called the *Bachillerato*, comparable to the French Baccalaureate. This gives students the basic qualification for university entry, though they must also take the university entry exam, the *Pruebas de Acceso a la Universidad (PAU)*, popularly called the *Selectividad*. However some choose to pursue vocational education and training or advanced art and design studies instead: these also offer a route to university.

The age ranges just given assume that students do not have to repeat school years. All stages of compulsory education are free if undertaken at a public school, except upper secondary for which fees are charged.



Figure 1.1  
The Spanish Education System





There are three **types of schools** in the Canary Islands:

- Public schools, fully state-maintained (around 75% of pupils).<sup>2</sup>
- Private but state-subsidised schools (around 20% of pupils).
- Private schools with no state subsidy, i.e. fully private (around 5% of pupils).

Private state-subsidised schools in the Canary Islands are fewer and take a lower percentage of pupils than in the rest of Spain.

Table 1.1 shows the numbers of public and private (both types) schools on each island: the proportion of private schools ranges from nil in the two smallest islands to 20% in Tenerife.

**Table 1.1 Public and private schools in the Canary Islands**

|                        | Tenerife   | Gran Canaria | La Palma  | Lanzarote | Fuerte-ventura | La Gomera | El Hierro | TOTAL   |
|------------------------|------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|----------------|-----------|-----------|---|
| <b>Public schools</b>  | 385        | 392          | 94        | 68        | 63             | 22        | 15        | 1 039 (84%)   |
| <b>Private schools</b> | 99 (20%)   | 88 (18%)     | 2 (2%)    | 6 (8%)    | 1 (2%)         | 0         | 0         | 196 (of which<br>100 subsidised,<br>96 fully private) |
| <b>TOTAL</b>           | <b>484</b> | <b>480</b>   | <b>96</b> | <b>74</b> | <b>64</b>      | <b>22</b> | <b>15</b> | <b>1 235</b>  |

Source: Consejería de Educación, Universidades y Sostenibilidad 2011.

Most pupils identified as having **Special Educational Needs** are taught alongside their peers in mainstream schools and ordinary classes: those whose needs are too severe for this go to Schools for Preferential Attention, Special Needs Classes or Special Needs Schools.

In the Canary Islands, school attended depends strongly on **area of residence**. 80% of students in PISA were in schools where the principal reported that admittance to his/her school is always based on the place of residence. This is around 15 percentage points above the Spanish average (66%). Canary Islands statistics tell a similar story. Of 2011/12 **admissions**, 72% were from within the zone, 12% from its border area, and 4% from further afield; for 12% there was no information.<sup>3</sup> Pupils from low-income families have priority in admission to public and private subsidised schools; many will also receive free transport to school and free lunches.

Spanish national law mandates 65% of the **curriculum**, leaving regions to decide on 35% (the proportions are 55% and 45% in the two most autonomous regions, the Basque country and Cataluña). In the first two years of secondary education when pupils are in principle aged 12-14, the curriculum in the Canary Islands consists almost entirely of compulsory subjects – Spanish language and literature, maths, science, geography and history, English, a second foreign language, technology, religion and physical education. Art is compulsory in the first year, optional in the second. Music, computing and citizenship are not taught in the first year, and are compulsory in the second. In the third year of ESO when students are in principle aged 14-15, science is replaced by compulsory biology and geology, physics and chemistry. Technology, art and music are available as optional subjects. A new subject, classical literature, is offered as an option; and computing and citizenship are not offered anymore. In the fourth and last year of ESO (students aged 15-16 in principle), all science subjects and the second foreign language cease to be compulsory and become optional. All third year optional subjects remain as options except classical culture, which is not offered. Latin appears and computing re-appears among the options. Spanish language and literature, maths, geography and history, English, religion and physical education remain compulsory and a new compulsory subject, ethics, appears.

**Assessment** is done each term by teachers, who also set and mark the test papers used at the end of each year to judge whether students are ready to move up to the next year, and the tests used at the end of compulsory secondary schooling to judge whether students have reached the standard required to merit a certificate of graduation from ESO. At the teacher's and school's discretion, this ESO graduation certificate may be granted even if a student has failed in one, two or three subjects. According to Spanish Ministry of Education statistics, in the school year 2007/08, 70% of Canary Islands students left secondary school with an ESO graduation certificate. Of those who graduated with certificates, 68% passed in all subjects, 17% failed one subject, 13% failed two subjects and 2% failed three subjects.

A Spanish national sample assessment is undertaken in the 4th year of primary and the 2nd year of ESO. A regionally-developed assessment involves all pupils in the same school years. In future it is intended to move the regional assessment to the 4<sup>th</sup> and final year of ESO. Internationally, as well as having taken part in PISA 2009, the Canary Islands region is entering a representative sample of pupils in TIMMS 2011 and PIRLS 2011.

Results from the regional secondary assessment, the national secondary assessment, TIMMS and PIRLS were not available at the time of preparation of this report. However, the national assessment of pupils' basic skills and knowledge application, done in the fourth year of primary school when pupils are typically 10 years old, produced results for the Canary Islands similar to those of PISA



for the 15-year-olds. Of 19 Spanish regions, the Canary Islands came 16th in average score for language, above only the Balearic Islands, Ceuta and Melilla; and 17th in average score for maths, above only Ceuta and Melilla. In science and in social/citizenship skills, out of 18 regions (the Basque country could not be compared to others because of translation problems), the Canary Islands came 14th, ahead of the same regions as for language plus Valencia. And as in PISA, overall results can be explained by the relatively high numbers of students failing to reach Level 2, coupled with very few reaching Level 5.

Spanish regions need not all operate the same **school day**, so long as students in compulsory education stay at school for 30 hours a week. The Canary Islands school day is from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. After lunch, the rest of the afternoon can be used for supplementary or complementary activities, for example to provide extra support for students who are struggling or falling behind.

**Teachers** are career civil servants who have passed a civil service exam and have been selected and appointed to posts through a selection process governed by detailed national regulations. (The only exception is for Catholic Religion teachers in secondary schools.) For public schools, all appointments are made by the Canary Islands Ministry of Education. Vacancies or long-term absences are covered by supply teachers, who are also civil servants. Teachers work a 37.5-hour week of which primary and nursery teachers must spend 28 hours, secondary teachers 24 hours, in school. Pupil-teacher ratios average 11 in public schools and a little over 15 in private schools (Instituto de Evaluación, 2010b, p. 37).

In addition to their teachers, every child in a Canary Islands school has a **tutor** whose job is to co-ordinate their overall education. One period a week is set aside for tutoring. The tutor – usually another teacher – helps the class teacher(s) to evaluate and improve the pupil's learning and progress; co-ordinate with the school counselling department when the pupil needs special educational support; and decide whether the pupil is ready to move up to the next grade at the end of the year.

This last decision is very important. **Repetition** of years is quite common in the Spanish system, and is particularly high in the Canary Islands. Spanish national statistics confirm that by the age of 14, fewer than six in ten Canary Islands students are in age-appropriate classes (Instituto de Evaluación, 2010b, p. 77).

In commissioning the OECD team to undertake this evaluation, **the Canary Islands education authorities asked the team to look particularly closely at the following aspects** of the school system, to take a view on whether they need improving and to offer practical suggestions.

- Grade repetition
- School action to improve performance
- Regional strategies to improve performance
- Support for struggling students
- Teaching and learning practice
- Teacher training
- Attitudes to failure and expectations of success
- Accountability for results (teachers and principals)
- Rewards for good performance (teachers and principals)
- School managers' leadership skills
- The school day
- Extra-curricular and complementary activities
- Family involvement
- Educational inspection

### Notes

1. Defined as students with a value smaller than -1 on the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status.
2. "Sistema estatal de indicadores de la educación", cited in *Evaluación general de diagnóstico 2009*, Grafico 2.6b, which gives this breakdown for students in Year 4 of primary school (9-10 year olds), assumed to be representative of all ages.
3. Canary Islands education authorities' reply to review team questions.



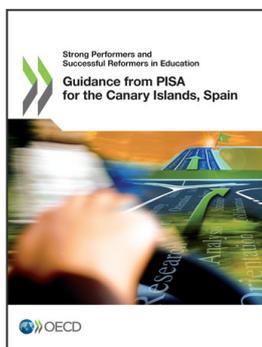
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