

POLICY INPUT

Considerations for a “European degree”

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The European University Association (EUA) welcomes the renewed political interest in transnational university collaboration and particularly the discussions around joint study programmes re-initiated by the [European Commission's higher education package from January 2022](#) and [the member states' response in the Council conclusions from April 2022](#). Deepening transnational university collaboration has great potential to strengthen European higher education and research and its international competitiveness, as well as European cooperation and solidarity. Among other initiatives, one of the ambitions stated in the higher education package is to set up a “European degree” including, as a first step, the development of a European label for joint programmes.

Transnational joint study programmes, as developed by several higher education institutions from different European countries, do already exist. However, there are still numerous challenges as well as legal and administrative obstacles to implementation, especially if students in these joint programmes are awarded a joint degree upon completion. In some cases, legal frameworks and regulation may hinder universities from awarding joint degrees. According to [the Bologna Process Implementation Report of 2018](#), only about 5% of higher education institutions across the European Higher Education Area award joint degrees. Obstacles to joint programmes and/or joint degrees also emerge from varying requirements related to curriculum design and delivery in the different higher education systems. These issues have come to the surface again in the context of the European Universities Initiative.

Against this backdrop, the European Commission is currently preparing a pilot for testing possible criteria for a European label for joint programmes.

EUA wishes to highlight several key principles that should be considered for further development:

Be clear about the concepts.

Joint programmes do not necessarily lead to joint degrees. While a study programme may be developed and delivered jointly by two or more higher education institutions, this may, but does not automatically mean that the degree itself is awarded jointly. In the discussions about a “European degree”, it is important to be clear about what is meant by this term, be it a label for joint programmes or a joint degree as an actual qualification. Thus far, different ideas and concepts appear in the discussions. Moreover, degree-awarding powers lie with different actors (higher education institutions, national authorities) depending on the country.

National reforms and the implementation of Bologna tools remain essential.

There are various reasons why a European label for joint programmes can be of interest to universities. That said, it will not by itself solve issues related to the implementation of joint study programmes or joint degrees, as these issues often stem from different and at times diverging requirements towards curriculum delivery across countries. In this regard, the [European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes](#), as adopted under the Bologna Process in 2015, is an important tool that should be implemented throughout the EHEA. EUA welcomes that this is underlined in the Council conclusions from 5 April, which must be followed by concrete action. In addition, further system level reforms remain an indispensable condition for moving forward with regard to transnational collaboration and joint educational provision.

A European label for joint programmes needs to provide real added value for universities and students.

- The criteria used for awarding the label should focus on added value provided through collaborative provision.
- A limited number of criteria should be used.
- The criteria should respect academic autonomy with regard to curriculum development. Therefore, the label must always remain voluntary.
- Clarification is needed as to which cycle the label would apply (i.e. bachelor's, master's, or doctorate), and to distinguish between master's students and doctoral candidates. Whenever necessary, a distinction should be made for doctoral education, as its organisation differs from that of bachelor's and master's degrees and central elements of doctoral education differ significantly among disciplines, institutions and countries.
- The criteria must be clear, unambiguous and verifiable, and institutions must be in a position to fulfil them and to be able to provide the data and information needed in a way that avoids unnecessary bureaucracy. The criteria should not be based on legal or regulatory frameworks which institutions cannot necessarily directly influence.
- Any duplication of existing quality assurance procedures should be avoided. Therefore, the criteria may refer to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) but should not imply double-checking of baseline quality assurance following the ESG.
- Access to the label should be open to joint programmes offered by higher education institutions from across the European Higher Education Area. Also, the involvement of non-European international partners in a joint programme should not make it ineligible.
- Clarity is needed regarding the evaluation and award procedure for the label, i.e. who will carry out the evaluation of joint programmes that apply and award the label.

EUA looks forward to contributing to continued discussions as the pilot phase begins. To ensure that the diversity of situations across Europe is accurately represented, the testing of criteria must be open and include a diverse range of higher education institutions in a sufficiently large sample.