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THE EUROPEAN DEGREE FROM A RECOGNITION PERSPECTIVE

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A look at policies
and pilot experiences



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This document was developed within the TPG-LRC Constructing Recognition in the EHEA (TPG-LRC CoRE) project, which aims to support the implementation of the Bologna Process focusing on its key commitment 2 on national legislation and procedures compliant with the Lisbon Recognition Convention in the countries of the Thematic Peer Group B (TPG B).

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/ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This publication, drafted in the framework of the project [TPG-LRC Constructing Recognition in the EHEA \(TPG-LRC CoRE\)](#), presents the reader with the ongoing process of putting the European degree in place, starting from the steps envisaged by the European Commission for its implementation and focusing on the current discussions at European level on shaping the European degree label.

Considering this perspective, the publication provides further inputs on the work that has been done, highlighting the key elements to support the eventual recognition of the European degree, once established.

The document also provides two case-studies from two of the pilot projects which tested the relevance of the co-created European criteria for a European degree label: the [EDLab](#) and the [ED-AFFICHE](#) projects.

Four key points emerge as crucial to work towards the implementation of the European degree, in the recognition perspective:

1. Acknowledging the relevance of **culture of recognition** and the importance of knowledge sharing around the concept and definition of the European degree.
2. Removal of any possible obstacles in the national legislations to the implementation of the European degree.
3. Increase the understanding and use of the **Bologna tools**, to be applied also in the recognition of the European degree.
4. **Cooperation among different stakeholders** will be crucial in the next stages of the strategy to implement the European degree, in the short and in the long term.

/ INTRODUCTION

On 27 March 2024, a [Blueprint for a European degree](#) was issued (European Commission, 2024), following the intention to develop a European degree as stated in the [European Strategy for Universities](#) (European Commission, 2022).

The European degree is envisioned as a “new type of qualification to be enshrined in national legislation”¹, based on commonly agreed European criteria. While joint degrees need to meet all the different national rules of each participating country, the European degree would not require any additional constraints at national level. The initiative has thus been presented by the European Commission as a reduction of bureaucracy, therefore facilitating the spread of joint degree programmes.

This publication is realised in the framework of the [TPG-LRC Constructing Recognition in the EHEA \(TPG-LRC CoRE\)](#) project, which aims to support the implementation of the Bologna Process focusing on its key commitment 2 on national legislation and procedures compliant with the Lisbon Recognition Convention in the countries of the Thematic Peer Group B (TPG B).

The present **“The European degree from a recognition perspective: a look at policies and pilot experiences”** aims at exploring the implications of the European degree from the recognition perspective, presenting the ongoing process of putting the European degree in place, as well as sharing the remaining questions and the way forward. As the European degree is still in the process of being developed at the time of issuing this publication, the aim is not to provide recommendations facilitating the recognition of the European degree, but rather to contribute to the reflection on the implementation of the European degree.

¹ Blueprint for a European degree, p.1.

Indeed, current ongoing discussions at European level are focusing on shaping the European degree label, therefore the possible recognition of the European degree would be considered as a further implementation step. Bearing this perspective in mind, the publication provides further inputs on the work done so far, highlighting the key elements that could support recognition of a European degree, once established.

This publication is the result of several consultations with stakeholders working in the field of higher education, including informal consultations with representatives of the European Commission, members of the Thematic Peer Group B on Key Commitment 2, project partners and relevant stakeholders, including two of the 6 Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects (EDLab and ED-AFFICHE projects).

As for the **structure of this publication**, the first section provides a brief overview of what we know so far, including policies at European level and two case studies from the above-mentioned pilot projects. The following section is dedicated to the remaining questions, and the final section presents the possible way forward for the implementation of the European degree in the recognition perspective.

/ WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

/ EUROPEAN DEGREE AT A POLICY LEVEL

The concept of “European degree” appeared in a policy document for the first time in 2020 as a “strategic instrument to achieve the **European Education Area**”² and as a “framework to ease the delivery of joint degrees of Universities alliances such as the European Universities”³.

The European degree was, since its conception, envisioned as “a new type of qualification to be enshrined in national legislation, [that] would make it easier for universities from different countries to cooperate seamlessly and develop innovative joint programmes leading to a joint degree, in full respect of their institutional autonomy and of the competences of Member State or regional governments”⁴.

Based on the lessons learned from the European Universities Initiative, the European Commission published in 2022 the European Strategy for Universities⁵, announcing plans for a European degree, with the aim of supporting employability and attractiveness of European higher education systems.

² <https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/the-eea-explained>

³ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, published on 30 September 2020, p. 20-21

⁴ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions a blueprint for a European degree, published on 27 March 2024, p.1

⁵ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities, published on 18 January 2022, p.3

In the same year, a call under the Erasmus+ programme was launched to support policy experimentation projects. From April 2023, six pilot projects involving over 60 higher education institutions and 17 ministries across the European Union (EU), were conducted to identify potential common criteria for the awarding of a European degree label, identified by the European Commission as a step towards the implementation of the initiative (see Figure 1), and as presented in the working document of the European Commission⁶. Final outcomes of the Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects have been gathered in a dedicated report (European Commission, 2024).

The horizontal principles on which the concept of the European degree is based imply **subsidiarity, institutional autonomy and academic freedom**, as the European degree would be delivered by Member States, regions and institutions. The European degree would be open to all types of higher education institutions, disciplines, levels of study, on a voluntary basis and in cooperation between institutions; the initiative is built on the existing tools developed in the framework of the Bologna process and once entered into force, would reduce administrative burdens with respect to the one currently required to establish joint degrees.

As stated in the Blueprint for a European degree, **the objectives of this initiative** are to increase employability and the relevance of higher education graduates' skills, as well as to enhance the visibility and attractiveness of European higher education systems. The European degree is thus envisioned as a driver for strategic European cooperation in higher education and global competitiveness. Nevertheless, several well-known **obstacles** to issuing joint degrees remain, including: differences in the use of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); different requirements for diploma templates; admission policies and mobility rules; accreditation requirements and restrictions on language use; differences in academic calendars, grading scales and workload; and the modality for final examinations.

Member States will choose their national strategy to integrate European degree into their national higher education system, starting from the implementation of the European degree label. This implementation step would then possibly require the review of national systems. In the Blueprint for a European degree⁷, the difference is described as follows:

⁶ European Commission, Commission staff Working Document accompanying the documents Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a blueprint for a European degree, Proposal for a Council recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education and Proposal for a Council recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education, published on 27 March 2024, pp.34-40.

⁷ Blueprint for European degree, p.12.

Entry point: a preparatory European degree label

Joint degree programmes meeting the European criteria may receive a European label from the competent authorities in charge of accreditation and/or quality assurance of higher education programmes (self-accrediting universities, accreditation agencies, quality assurance agencies). While the label will provide a powerful branding tool, it will not solve the obstacles encountered by universities to establish and run joint degree programmes. This path would be open to universities after adopting the proposed European criteria and developing guidance to implement these.

Entry point: a European degree

A degree would be awarded jointly by several universities from different countries (e.g. a European university alliance). The European degree would be integrated into national legislation as a new type of qualification. This would offer a significant simplification for universities and students by removing disparities between national rules and provides EU universities with a common and clear framework for creating joint degree programmes. As with any degree, the European degree would be accredited in accordance with national legislation and national qualifications frameworks by the competent authorities at institutional, regional, or national level. A European degree could also be awarded by a legal entity established by several universities from different countries (e.g. a European University alliance with a legal status). Some alliances of universities have already set up such legal entities, and are exploring the use of existing European legal tools like the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). This path would possibly be the simplest and most efficient for universities, in terms of associated costs and required resources.

The current European criteria for a European degree (label) which have been integrated in the Blueprint for a European degree and the Annex 2 of the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education, both published on 27 March 2024, are based on the outcomes of the pilot projects, and are listed below:

/ Transnational programme organisation and management

- _ Higher education institutions involved
- _ Transnational joint degree delivery
- _ Joint arrangements for the joint programme
- _ Quality assurance arrangements
- _ Graduate tracking

/ Learning experience

- _ Student-centred learning
- _ Interdisciplinarity
- _ Labour market relevance
- _ Digital skills
- _ Transnational campus – access to services
- _ Flexible and embedded student mobility
- _ Co-evaluation and co-supervision for dissertations

/ European values

- _ Democratic values
- _ Multilingualism
- _ Inclusiveness
- _ Green transition

Next steps towards the implementation of the European degree foresee the establishment of a European degree Policy Lab as a “series of dedicated in-depth discussions and focused sessions [...] with the aim of accelerating action and any necessary national reforms and developing implementation guidelines and action plans [...] its goal would be to foster peer learning and provide guidance on moving towards a European degree”⁸.

⁸ <https://op.europa.eu/en/web/eu-law-and-publications/publication-detail/-/publication/4559af49-43e2-11ef-865a-01aa75ed71a1>

Possible next steps envisaged by the European Commission towards a European degree are visually described in the figure below.



Figure 1. The road towards a European degree: illustration of possible next steps. Source: European Commission, 2024.

/ A FEW CASE STUDIES AND MAIN TAKEAWAYS

From April 2023, six pilot projects, involving over 60 higher education institutions and 17 ministries across the EU, were conducted to:

- / explore and test the relevance of the co-created European criteria for a European degree label
- / explore and recommend possible optimization of the proposed set of criteria to maximise the potential and attractiveness of the label
- / elaborate proposals, aimed to facilitate the development and implementation of joint degrees in Europe⁹.

Lessons learnt from two of these pilot projects are presented below.

EDLab project

The project [European Degree Label. Institutional laboratory \(EDLab\)](#), run between 1 March 2023 to 1 March 2024, has involved 4 European University Alliances ([ARQUS](#), [EUTOPIA](#), [SEA-EU](#), [ENLIGHT](#)), with 13 universities in total and 35 associated partners including higher education authorities, quality assurance agencies and other regional and international organisations.

EDLab project activities focused on three areas:

/ Mapping and screening of existing joint programmes

- _ Analysing the suitability of the criteria proposed by the European Commission for the award of the European degree label in the call and screening existing joint programmes against them;
- _ Analysing obstacles to the criteria's fulfilment, with particular focus on France, Italy, Portugal and Spain

/ Global attractiveness

- _ Analysing how an European degree label and joint programmes in general enhance the global attractiveness of the European Higher Education System

/ Design and testing of the European degree label

- _ Analysing the procedure for the issue of an European degree label and its format, along with potential barriers to be addressed.

⁹ Ibid., p.32.

The project results are gathered in the “[Report on barriers in applying the criteria in current joint programmes](#)”, published in January 2024, in the project “[Report on the potential attractiveness of a European Degree Label](#)”, published in March 2024, and in the “[Report on the pilot issuing of a joint European degree label certificate following the compliancy exercise](#)”, published in May 2024.

ED-AFFICHE project

The **European Degree: Advancing, Facilitating and Fostering International Collaboration in Higher Education (ED-ADFFICHE)** project consortium was composed of six university alliances (Una Europa, 4EU+, CHARM-EU, EC2U, EU-CONEXUS, and Unite!), representing 51 higher education institutions from 22 different countries. The consortium is supported by 19 national and regional ministries in charge of higher education, as well as 15 national accreditation and quality assurance agencies.

The ED-AFFICHE project mainly focused on three areas:

/ Mapping the criteria associated with the European degree

- _ Carrying out a comparative analysis of the criteria associated with the European degree label and the process behind it through consultations with higher education institutions and national focus groups.

/ Dialogue with national and regional authorities

- _ Exploring solutions to overcome obstacles, by providing recommendations aimed at facilitating smoother implementation processes for HEIs, through consultations with legal experts and competent authorities.

/ Recommendation on future European degree (label)

- _ Providing policy recommendations on the future of the European degree (label), from different stakeholders' perspectives (including students, quality assurance agencies, employers, legal experts, programme coordinators, and national authorities)
- _ Exploring aspects such as criteria revisions, verification methods, and label design, also including elements linked to European Commission coordination, improved Bologna tools, national collaboration and ongoing exchanges within expertise communities¹⁰.

¹⁰ <https://charm-eu.eu/resource/ed-affiche-project-deliverables/>

The ED-AFFICHE project consortium elaborated recommendations addressed to European Commission, Members States, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions and, more broadly, to all stakeholders involved, as outlined in the “[Policy Recommendations on the Future of the European Degree \(Label\)](#)”, published in 2024 (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Recommendations on the European Degree Label. Source: ED-AFFICHE

/ WHICH QUESTIONS REMAIN

Discussions in the framework of the project¹¹ focused on the remaining questions related to the development and recognition of the European degree, with a look at the key commitments of the Bologna Process. Stakeholders involved also highlighted what – from their perspective – the steps to be taken in the short, medium and long term should be.

On one hand, from the recognition point of view, according to ENIC-NARICs and European admissions officers, the European degree follows the same recognition criteria and methodology applied to joint degrees.

Looking at the Bologna Process, the European degree would easily fit in the ongoing processes in place to support the implementation of the three Key Commitments (a three-cycle system compatible with the overarching Qualifications Framework of the EHEA and first and second cycle degrees scaled by ECTS, national legislation and procedures compliant with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), Quality assurance in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area), as the Bologna tools are meant to be generally applicable to all qualifications in place.

On the other hand, some questions remain to be addressed. One is linked to the need for distinction between the European degree and (other) joint programmes, joint degrees, double degrees and various forms of transnational education, and how its added value will be demonstrated. Another one is connected to how the quality assurance tools (European Standards and Guidelines for Quality assurance, the European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint programmes) will apply to the European degree.

¹¹ An online preparatory meeting was organised with relevant external stakeholders involved at different levels in the organisation and promotion of European Degree, on 21 October 2021. This meeting involved representatives from the European Commission, two of the 6 Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects, project partners, TPG A on Qualification Framework and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

/ AREAS FOR FURTHER REFLECTIONS

In conclusion, four main points are underlined as areas to structure the work towards the implementation of the European degree.

1. The first element is linked to the acknowledgement of the relevance of **culture of recognition** and the importance of knowledge sharing around the concept and definition of the European degree. Especially in the short term, clarifying the boundaries of what is a European degree and what is not – compared with the already existing qualifications resulting from transnational education programmes – emerges from different stakeholders as a key priority in creating a culture of recognition both among administrative and academic staff in higher education institutions, the student community and business sector. Moreover, this could support the global attractiveness of the European degree.
2. The second area for commitment which arises as fundamental in supporting the implementation of the European degree is the one linked to **national legislation**, to remove any possible obstacles at the national level.
3. Need to increase understanding and use of the **Bologna tools**, namely the ECTS, the Diploma Supplement (DS), the overarching and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ESG), the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) to be applied also in the recognition of European degree.
4. Last but not least, **cooperation among different stakeholders** will be crucial in the next stages of the strategy to implement the European degree, in the short and in the long term. The involvement of administrative and academic staff from higher education institutions, as well as representatives for the business community and national competent authorities in the European degree Policy Lab would support a holistic approach towards the definition of common guidelines for the implementation of the European degree. In particular, tools and resources to support administrative and academic staff in designing and developing the European degree will be crucial in supporting the effective implementation of the initiative. In the long run, systemic cooperation would enhance trust among different actors and higher education systems involved at European level, promoting full implementation of automatic recognition.

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/ FIGURES

Figure 1.

The road towards a European degree: illustration of possible next steps. Source: European Commission, 2024.

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Figure 2.

Recommendations on the European Degree Label. Source: ED-AFFICHE

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As stated in the text, a preparatory meeting was organised in the framework of the TPG-LRC CoRE project and held online on 21 October 2024. The meeting was an occasion for dialogue on this evolving concept among different stakeholders working in the field (competent authorities, QA agencies, higher education institutions and experts of the Bologna Process).

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