

# INFORMAL MEETING OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH MINISTERS

16-17 SEPTEMBER 2024, BUDAPEST

## BACKGROUND PAPER – PLENARY 1: ‘THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN DEGREE’

### INTRODUCTION

The European Universities alliances represent new pilot models for higher education cooperation in the EU. The 2021 Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative<sup>1</sup> invited Member States and the Commission to explore the need for and feasibility of joint European degrees within the alliances. In response to the Commission’s proposals in its 2022 Communication on a European strategy for universities, the Council adopted conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe<sup>2</sup>. This document invited Member States and the Commission to explore common criteria that could lead to a potential European label for joint programmes. The conclusions indicate the need to explore common criteria ‘that could lead to a potential European label for joint programmes’; ‘later on, the possible design and delivery, on a voluntary basis, at national, regional or institutional level, of joint degrees at all levels, based on these co-created European criteria, could be envisaged, in accordance with the existing instruments of the Bologna Process.’

Further to the Council conclusions, the Commission started preparatory work and published its Communication on a blueprint towards a European degree on 27 March 2024. The Communication was accompanied by two proposals for Council recommendations, one on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, and another on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education (OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p. 14).

<sup>2</sup> OJ C 167, 21.4.2022, p. 9.

## **THE COMMISSION'S VISION FOR A EUROPEAN DEGREE AS SET OUT IN ITS COMMUNICATION**

The Communication details a staged approach for Member States to embark on the pathway towards a European degree. The Commission proposed two entry points for Member States: a preparatory European label and the European degree. The label would be awarded to students of joint degree programmes meeting commonly agreed European criteria, reflecting the relevance of the learning experience, commitment to common values, and transnational programme organisation and management between universities, together with their national or regional degree.

The proposed European degree would be awarded jointly by several universities from different countries or by a possible European legal entity established by these universities. The European degree would be integrated into national legislation as a new type of qualification, accredited in accordance with national legislation and qualifications frameworks by competent authorities at institutional, regional, or national level. According to the Communication “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”.

The Commission developed a set of criteria with higher education stakeholders in 2022 which were tested by six Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects between April 2023 and March 2024. The pilots proposed changes to the criteria, resulting in the list set out in Annex 2 to the proposal for a Council recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education.

The Communication outlines several key benefits associated with the possible creation of a European degree. For students, it would provide more opportunities to study in various European countries, facilitate the offering of innovative joint study programmes, and enhance skills acquisition, leading to higher employability worldwide. Employers would benefit from increased transparency and clarity in recruitment, as a European degree would be easy to understand and signify a specific set of valued transversal competences. This would also make Europe a more attractive destination for talented students, who would be equipped with relevant skills for the European labour market. Universities would gain from simplified ways to collaborate, pooling resources to offer opportunities they could not provide alone, and embedding learning periods abroad in their curricula.

## POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

The Commission Communication presents an argumentative vision for enhancing collaboration and mobility within European higher education. However, significant challenges and concerns must be addressed before realising this vision. These include the diversity of higher education systems and national regulatory frameworks, and the varying levels of readiness among Member States. Existing double or joint degree programmes already offer many of the benefits identified by the Commission. One of the main questions therefore is whether the introduction of the European degree would achieve the desired added value, taking into account the necessary administrative procedures, including possible changes to existing rules and frameworks.

Moreover, the mutual recognition of qualifications remains a contentious issue. Although the Communication proposes mechanisms for recognition, the practical implementation of these processes across all Member States may face difficulties. Furthermore, more information is needed on the practicalities of the proposed European criteria and the quality assurance aspects (both internal and external) of the proposed initiatives in order to help Member States to make informed decisions.

Another concern could be the different timing of the introduction of the preparatory European label or the European degree in the Member States, which could lead to a multi-speed Europe. Varying levels of support for individual higher education institutions, including financial incentives linked to the preparatory European label or the European degree may contribute to territorial disparities and imbalances in brain circulation.

Securing sustainable funding for the European degree initiative poses another critical challenge. While the Communication outlines potential funding sources, the long-term financial viability and equitable distribution of funds need thorough examination. Exploring diverse and sustainable funding models, including public-private partnerships and EU-level funding, will be crucial for long-term success. Smaller or less well-funded institutions may struggle to meet these demands, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities within the European higher education landscape. Therefore, ensuring equitable access to funding for all institutions, regardless of size or location, is essential in order to provide fair and equal opportunities for higher education institutions. The costs to students, especially for those with fewer opportunities to participate in a European degree programme should also be taken into account.

Ministers are invited to prepare interventions of no more than three minutes, focusing on the following questions:

- 1. How can we ensure that the proposed European degree respects the diverse educational traditions and regulatory frameworks of individual Member States and national competences in the field of higher education, while fostering deeper integration and cooperation among higher education institutions that take into account a balanced brain circulation?***
- 2. In your opinion, how can it be ensured that those higher education institutions, which are not in a position to issue joint degrees – including a possible European degree –, are not at a serious competitive disadvantage?***