

ALL YOU MUST KNOW ABOUT THE EUROPEAN DEGREE and common misunderstandings

What is the difference between a joint programme and a joint degree? And between the European degree and the European degree label? The last two terms have been added to the general glossary of terms in the HE sector in the context of the package launched by the European Commission for the higher education sector last March 2024 [Commission presents a blueprint for a European degree | European Education Area](#). But are HE practitioners aware of what they mean and imply? This note is meant to clarify the main terminology regarding the topic of joint education in the European context. Its first target group are the Dutch HEIs and their international partners. Further readings are indicated.

Introduction

The introduction of the European Degree is the ultimate initiative of the European Commission (EC) to reach compatibility and comparability of higher education degrees in the EU. Although limited to transnational joint programmes, it is at the same time an indicator of mutual and ultimately automatic recognition of degrees offered by HE institutions. The foundation is offered by the [Bologna Process](#) key instruments: *European Qualifications Frameworks*, *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)*, *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)* and the *Lisbon Recognition Convention*.

Joint programmes range from involvement of two to more partners. They are the essence of the work programmes of the European University Alliances. Joint programmes are based on agreed *common programme learning outcomes* (LOs) and result in double, multiple and joint degrees. Joint (national) degrees, at present, require multiple national accreditations and/or accreditation according to the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes* endorsed in 2015 by the signatory countries of the Bologna Declaration. Contrary to more widely held opinions, this type of accreditation is straight forward meeting criteria as defined in the ESG.

To facilitate the introduction of the European Degree, the EC makes a distinction between the European Degree label and the European Degree. The EC has defined a set of criteria to be met. Besides the Bologna key instruments these are: embedded (physical) mobility, digital and green skills, multilingualism, interdisciplinary approaches, labour market relevance, democratic values and inclusion.

Awarding a European Degree or label is a decision made by the Universities involved, meeting national legislation and assure appropriate (national) accreditation and recognition. The EC has proposed a new European Quality Assurance and Recognition System to facilitate the awarding of the European Degree.

Mid-2025 the European Commission will launch the European Degree exploratory measures, a new Erasmus+ Action which will support (1) for European degree *pathway projects* enabling EU countries to navigate the pathway towards a European degree and (2) European degree *design measures* to enable HE institutions to adapt existing joint programmes or to create new ones leading to a European Degree.

Definitions

Joint programme: An integrated curriculum coordinated, jointly designed and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from EHEA countries and leading to Double/Multiple Degrees or a Joint Degree.

Programme learning outcomes: Statements of what an individual should know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a learning process resulting in the awarding of a degree. These should be fully aligned with National and European Qualifications Frameworks and preferably related to/based on current [Subject Specific Area Reference Qualifications Reference Frameworks](#).

Double or multiple degree: Separate degrees awarded by higher education institutions **offering the Joint Programme** attesting the successful completion of this programme. If more than two degrees are awarded by more than two institutions, this is a 'Multiple Degree', if two degrees are awarded, this is a 'Double Degree'.

Joint degree: A single degree awarded by two or more HE Institutions having been accredited according to multiple national legislation and/or the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes resulting in a single diploma and single Diploma Supplement signed by the designated representatives of those institutions.

Joint European Degree Label: A preparatory label - given to joint degree programmes that meet the European criteria; this means students receive a 'European label' certificate together with their joint degree. The certificate has no legal significance and should be perceived as a 'seal of excellence'.

Joint European Degree: A new type of qualification named 'European degree' awarded either jointly by several universities from different countries or possibly by a European legal entity established by such universities. This degree meets European criteria and will require accreditation meeting national legal conditions and recognition of the countries involved. The EC conditions the use of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes ensuring a single procedure. The European Degree is an addition to existing national degrees. It is not based on binding EU-law and is therefore a voluntary instrument open to any type of European Higher Institution in the EU- member states.

Questions and Answers

Q: Is it complicated to design, implement and deliver a joint transnational programme?

A: It is not much more difficult than setting-up and delivering a regular mono-, multi- or interdisciplinary programme. National and transnational programmes all have to meet the same criteria and standards as agreed in the context of the Bologna Process. A joint programme requires fully aligned or common programme learning outcomes, joint development, coordination and execution. Internationally designed examples of learning outcomes are available: Tuning-CALOHEE project.

Q: Is it required that Higher Education institutions that award a joint bachelor, master or PhD degree, have the formal powers to do so as well as having the accreditation for the programme in place?

A: Yes, this is required. To award a degree, the Higher Education Institution involved should have the legal authority to do so. The programme involved should be formally recognised and accredited according to national legislation of the countries involved.

Q: Can HE institutions just initiate a new joint international bachelor or master programme leading to any form of degree?

A: Yes, but countries apply different national rules and regulations to start new programmes, including transnational joint programmes. These must be respected and condition the successful establishment of a joint programme.

Another way to initiate a joint programme is to combine two or more existing programmes, with national accreditation obtained. It is then important to check whether the programme learning outcomes for each of the programmes are still met. It might be advisable to combine the different sets of LOs in one common set. In this case it must be ensured these do not differ substantially from the original ones, and that there is some element of joint development, coordination and execution.

Q: Is it possible to apply the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes for accreditation even if national legislation is not in place in all countries involved?

A: This is possible. Applying the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes* requires one HE institution to approach an EQAR registered QA Agency to implement the procedure on behalf of all degree awarding partners. Not all countries involved have to formally recognise the awarded joint, double or multiple degree to make it valid for accreditation. The recognition of accreditation

according to the European approach is a responsibility of the dedicated national agency on behalf of the national authority.

Q: Is there a difference between the EU proposed *European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education* and the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, initiated and endorsed by the Bologna Process*?

A: Yes, these are different tools, although having a comparable objective. The proposed [EU Recommendation on European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education](#) , makes full use of the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*, but is meant to offer a legal foundation and instrument to simplify accreditation processes for education provisions, and to serve as a robust basis for offering the Joint European Degree.

Q: What is the simplest form of a joint bachelor or master programme?

A: The easiest model to implement is a joint transnational programme of two universities established in different countries using existing curricula. Such a programme is designed and coordinated together, and partners have a shared responsibility in delivering its components to meeting the agreed programme learning outcomes. The legal basis is the automatic recognition of course units / modules taken by the partner institution. Experience shows that the additional time input for running such a programme is rather limited.

When having agreed common programme learning outcomes, based on the appropriate National/European Qualifications Framework and a QA system according to the ESG, applying ECTS, it meets the conditions for a joint programme but also the requirements for a joint degree. By meeting the additional EC conditions, including the proposed European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in HE, the programme also allows for offering a Joint European Degree.

Q: Is a dual programme a joint programme?

A: The term "dual programme" has different meanings and connotations in different educational contexts, entities and countries. When resulting in a 'dual degree', it is not a joint programme. According to the European Consortium for Accreditation in HE (ECA) a 'dual degree' refers to 'two degrees awarded individually, attesting the successful completion of two separate curricula, with potential overlap and efficiencies in course-taking, and, if more than one institution is involved, each institution is primarily responsible for its own degree'. Students complete the requirements for two degrees from one or two institutions, with efficiencies in course taking. A dual degree is thus awarded for two programmes separately, and these two programmes have some coordination and coordinated elements, but there are two separate curricula that are not integrated. In consequence, no common programme learning outcomes are defined.

Q: What is the difference between a double degree and a dual degree?

A: A double degree can only be an outcome of a joint programme, a dual degree refers to two separate curricula with efficiencies in course taking. In a dual degree there is no level of jointness, each institute is responsible for their own curriculum. In a joint programme, leading to a double degree, both institutions are jointly responsible for the entire curriculum of the joint programme, including those elements that are offered by the partner.

Further readings

- European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, [*Blueprint for a European degree – Frequently asked questions*](#), Publications Office of the European Union, 2024
- TUNING-CALOHEE Projects: Subject Specific Qualifications Reference Frameworks: <https://www.calohee.eu/>
- [European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes - EQAR](#)

This document has been composed by Anja Dieters (NHL Stenden), Robert Wagenaar (RUG) and Madalena Pereira (NA Erasmus+ NL) to support the TCA European University Alliances in the Dutch Higher Education Landscape, 3rd April 2025.

Disclaimer: This is not an official document and therefore no rights can be derived from it.