

All you must know about the European Degree and common misunderstandings (*update June 2026*)

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 Higher Education (HE) sector in the context of the package launched by the European Commission (EC) for the higher education sector in March 2024 [Commission presents a blueprint for a European degree | European Education Area](#). Since then, the European Council adopted a [Resolution on the joint European degree label](#) and a possible joint European Degree in May 2025. 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 Higher Education Institutions (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 European Union (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 HEIs 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 multiple partners. They are one of the flagships of the European University Alliances. Joint programmes are based on agreed *common programme learning outcomes* (LOs) and result in double, multiple or joint degrees. Joint programmes currently need to undergo multiple national accreditation procedures or a single procedure based on the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes* (European Approach) endorsed in 2015 by the signatory countries of the Bologna Declaration. Contrary to some misconceptions, [this type of accreditation](#) is simply an application of the ESG to joint programmes and is intended to streamline and simplify joint programme accreditation through a straightforward single accreditation procedure.

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

Applying for a European Degree or Label is a decision made by the universities themselves, meeting national legislation and assuring appropriate (national) accreditation and recognition. The label is awarded to joint programmes by either a quality assurance agency or a consortium of self-accrediting higher education institutions. The EC has proposed a new European Quality Assurance and Recognition System to facilitate the awarding of the European Degree.

The Erasmus+ programme supports the introduction of the European Degree through specific actions: 1) the [European Degree exploratory measures](#) to enable HEIs to adapt existing joint programmes or to create new ones leading to a joint European Degree Label and 2) [European Degree Pathway Projects](#) enabling EU countries, together with their accreditation and quality assurance agencies, universities, students economic and social partners, to implement a joint European Degree Label in their national context.

The expected timeline 2026 – 2028 is as follows:

- Joint European Degree to be rolled out first as a label for joint degree programmes as from mid-2026.
- Publishing of [the operational guide](#) detailing the requirements for the award of the Joint European Degree Label. It enables quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, and relevant stakeholders to implement the label.
- A second call of the European Degree exploratory measures in the second half of 2026.
- Continuous work on facilitating the creation of joint programmes with national authorities.
- Evaluation of the Joint European Degree Label and feasibility study on a Joint European Degree as a type of qualification.

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. [Definitions - EQAR](#)

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](#). [See ECTS users' guide 2015](#)¹

Double or multiple degree: Separate degrees awarded by HEIs 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'. [Definitions - EQAR](#). According to the operational guide for the Joint European Degree Label, Double/multiple degrees are not eligible for the Joint European Degree Label.²

Joint degree: A single diploma awarded by HEIs offering the joint programme and nationally acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme. [Definitions - EQAR](#)

Joint European Degree Label: A quality label granted to joint programmes delivered through transnational cooperation between higher education institutions from different countries, including at least two EU Member States, to act as a branding tool, promoting

¹ Be aware an updated version of the ECTS users' guide is expected in 2027.

² [Operational guide for the Joint European Degree Label - Publications Office of the EU](#), Annex 1: Glossary

compliance with European standards and providing visibility and prestige to the labelled joint programmes. The label is granted based on common European criteria following an assessment by competent accreditation or quality assurance authorities, such as self-accrediting universities, accreditation agencies, or quality assurance bodies.³

Joint European Degree⁴: The European Commission is working towards creating a Joint European Degree together with EU countries and their higher education systems. Awarding this type of degree is not yet possible. The new type of qualification named 'European Degree' will be 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 it to 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 and can only be awarded to Joint Programmes awarding a Joint Degree. It is not based on binding EU-law and is therefore a voluntary instrument open to any type of HEI in the EU-member states. The first step towards the goal of the European Degree is the Joint European Degree Label.

Questions and Answers

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

A: A [detailed list of barriers by European country](#) has been collected in the frame of the Erasmus+ European Policy Experimentation projects on a joint European Degree Label. Nevertheless, national and transnational programmes all have to meet the same criteria and standards as agreed in the context of the Bologna Process and in that sense, the criteria for joint transnational programmes are not new. 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 HEIs 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 HEI 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.

³ [Operational guide for the Joint European Degree Label - Publications Office of the EU](#), Annex 1: Glossary

⁴ This is not an official definition. The concept of a European Degree is presented in the document 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 [EUR-Lex - 52024SC0074 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

Q: Can HEIs 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 sufficient 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: The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (European Approach) can always be applied as a method of joint programme evaluation. However, this needs to be distinguished from the recognition of the outcome of a European Approach review. Applying the *European Approach* requires one HEI to approach an EQAR registered QA agency to implement the procedure on behalf of all degree awarding partners. Following the review, not all countries involved might recognise the accreditation, depending on the existing legislative barriers. Recognition of the accreditation decision is the responsibility of each specific national authority. An overview of how different national systems allow the EA and recognise its outcomes is available [here](#).

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: The EC proposed a set of recommendations [EU Recommendation on European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education](#). These build on the tools endorsed in the Bologna process and go beyond those to recommend how to improve quality assurance systems and facilitate transnational cooperation. The proposed European Quality Assurance and Recognition Systems in HE 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 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. Again, it is imperative that there is sufficient element of joint development, coordination and execution.

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. The joint European degree label will be awarded to joint programmes on the basis of [criteria that were adopted in May 2025](#). If the programme meets the criteria, it qualifies to receive the label.

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. In the context of joint programmes, programmes resulting in a ‘dual degree’, are not a joint programme. According to the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (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, nor is there joint development, coordination or execution of the programme.

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
- [EUR-Lex - 32025G02939 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)
- TUNING-CALOHEE Projects: Subject Specific Qualifications Reference Frameworks: <https://www.calohee.eu/>
- [European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes - EQAR](#)
- [Operational guide for the Joint European Degree Label - Publications Office of the EU](#)
- [Joint European degree - European Education Area](#)

This document has been written by Anja Dieters (NHL Stenden), Robert Wagenaar (RUG) and Madalena Pereira (National Agency Erasmus+ NL) to support the TCA European University Alliances in the Dutch Higher Education Landscape, 3rd April 2025. This is an updated version concluded in June 2026.

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