



Joint Position of Una Europa, UNITE! & EC2U on the European Degree

Why a “European Degree”?

Offering joint international programmes at higher education level allows universities to enhance the quality of their offer. Joint degree programmes provide students with opportunities that individual institutions cannot offer to the same extent.

To ensure high impact, we advocate that the “European Degree” is open for all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to apply for, primarily with a European multilateral consortium. Offering the opportunity to include a limited number of international partners from third countries beyond the EHEA is an idea that merits further investigation within the European Approach. We also advocate that the “European Degree” covers Bachelor, Master and Doctorate levels and promotes openness and inclusion, in line with Europe’s core values.

In our view, offering a “European Degree” as an excellence label offers the following added value over what is currently on offer:

Simplification of process

The vast majority of Europe’s HEIs do not have the resources to invest in today’s highly resource-intensive and complex processes to implement joint degrees in practice due to a large number of bottlenecks existing between the different national¹ higher education systems, which have different and sometimes contradictory national regulations.

The “European Degree” should be promoted as an enabler to break down those bottlenecks – a one-off effort to facilitate the establishing and running of more joint degree programmes in the future.

Increased visibility and recognition

Universities value greatly the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters Degrees (EMJMDs), EIT Masters programmes and Marie-Skłodowska Curie Joint Doctorates (EJDs) on offer by the EU. However, the numerous ways of awarding the degrees via e.g. single, double, multiple and joint diplomas illustrate the complicated nature of putting together and selling joint programmes in Europe.

The “European Degree” should offer a clear and attractive label and certificate for awarding a joint degree at European level, leading to a single document awarded by

¹ When referencing national legislation and regulations in this text, we highlight the fact that this includes the competences of regions in the field of higher education in certain countries.



the Higher Education Institutions offering the joint programme and which is recognized by national authorities, Higher Education Institutions and employers alike. The added value should be clear to students in terms of employability, enhanced mobility and networking opportunities. A collaborative approach with employers should be encouraged in relation to the development and delivery of the joint programmes.

Enhanced quality

In our view, “European Degrees” should guarantee the possibility of multilingual, intercultural, interdisciplinary, research-based and flexible learning paths that improve their employability in the broadest sense. Previous studies, including the [REDEEM](#) and [REDEEM2](#) projects, show that alumni of joint programmes benefit from higher employability in comparison to their peers with a single, national degree.

By connecting these broadly defined minimum requirements to the “European Degree” label, the quality of the Higher Education offer will be enhanced.

This defined added value of the “European Degree” should naturally result in enhancing the competitiveness of the European Higher Education offer, attracting more global talent while at the same time promoting European values of diversity, openness and inclusion.

What are the bottlenecks today?

The introduction of the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in 2015 is a welcome step forward to ease external quality assurance of joint programmes at European level. The European approach is in principle accepted by all the Bologna countries, but in practice, not all of them have started implementing it.

Just a couple of illustrative examples of bottlenecks that HEIs are confronted with when developing joint degrees via the European Approach due to restrictive national legislation regarding:

- tuition fees
- the selection of students
- the use of foreign languages in a degree programme
- curricula (minimum or maximum ECTS credits per course / minimum ECTS credits for compulsory courses)
- the possibility to create an interdisciplinary degree
- forcing programmes to go through a new accreditation procedure every time the consortium partners for the joint degree change (relevant in case not all partners are able to join in from the start, due to restrictive national legislation)
- the necessary components of the graduation diploma and the joint diploma
- the obligation of double or single enrolment of students and PhD candidates in chosen universities and doctoral schools upon arrival at the university etc.



The existence of such differences in national legislation makes negotiating a joint degree a complex, and sometimes practically impossible, exercise. The added value of a European degree compared to the already existing possibilities of international cooperation, is limited, if consortia of HEIs still need to adhere to all diverging national rules when trying to formulate such a European degree.

The “European Degree” as an enabler

Establishing a “European Degree” along the lines of the objectives described above makes its award via a single document highly attractive for students, academics, higher education institutions, employers and national authorities alike. There is still quite some way to go at the level of some national authorities to make this true joint degree a possibility today.

The “European Degree” can thereby act as a true enabler for making joint programmes that lead to a joint degree at European level much simpler and less resource-intensive to implement. To ensure success, we advocate that the following measures are developed and implemented:

Incentives for national legislators to work towards a truly simplified European Approach

The “European Degree’s” inherent quality enhancing approach, potential capacity to contribute to a more united European Higher Education Area and attract global talent and enhanced offer to students should be highly attractive to national authorities. We suggest that the externally hired agency should research why neither the existence of the European Approach in itself, nor the existence of Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters in themselves, were sufficient as enablers, and why this was apparently not attractive enough to national authorities to make the necessary changes in order to make the European Approach work smoothly in the short-term.

Further incentives should be given to national legislators to work towards a truly simplified European Approach in a prompt manner, with single accreditation via one country and inherent trust. Maximum flexibility – or at least possibility to experiment in the short term - should be offered by all national legislators in the European Higher Education Area to develop joint “European degrees”. For example, we would advocate the need for experimentation in national legislation for “European degrees”, so that the above restrictive rules can be set aside. Offering maximum flexibility with national legislation for European degrees offers a more realistic approach at this stage, rather than attempting to reach a soft harmonisation of national law.

In order to facilitate the above, establishing close cooperation between European Universities and national ministries responsible for higher education is a top priority.

A dedicated open and competitive EU funding programme for Higher Education Institutions to apply for setting up, running and offering scholarships for their “European Degree”



We would advocate for a quality label linked to a newly established, dedicated funding instrument for the “European degree”. However, this should not be mandatory for awarding the “European degree”. Accreditation via the simplified European Approach should be sufficient.

The funding, however, can provide an important incentive to reward the effort of universities in the setting up and sustainability of their “European Degree”. It should be awarded based on a peer review process for evaluating bottom-up bids for competitive funding, thereby implemented along the lines of EMJMDs and EJDs, but dedicated to the “European degree” certificate. The quality label will provide further incentive for national legislators to work towards flexibility for this highly attractive instrument.

By implementing the defined measures - for a working European approach in all countries, for flexible national legislation when forming a European programme, mutual recognition and trust so that accreditation in one country suffices for all, and for competitive financing as a quality enabler and incentive to form “European degrees” – Europe’s Higher Education Institutions will be empowered to develop the next generation of programmes that truly contribute to Europe’s global competitiveness. Our proposal is that short-term efforts focus on these measures before the necessity of more ambitious plans can be assessed, such as developing a European accreditation agency or a move towards EU competence in awarding degrees.