CIVIS' POSITION ON A JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE

Input for European Commission call for evidence

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Policy recommendations towards a Joint European Degree

Reaching a common understanding

The efforts towards the establishment of a Joint European Degree still require clear conceptual harmonisation, both on **what we mean by a European Degree** and to what extent we refer to joint programmes, joint degrees or both. The first category (joint programmes), for instance, can lead to different degree-awarding arrangements among higher education institutions, such as multiple degrees, joint degrees, or combinations of both.

While the aim of creating a "European Degree" is to provide a strong academic degree that supports recognition and portability across Europe, the certified body of knowledge, skills, and competencies that lead to such approaches can be provided under multiple formats, all responding to similar connections with the criteria in use in the piloting phase of the European Degree label (EDL).

While current approaches tend to mostly favour joint programmes that lead to the award of a single joint degree by multiple providers (based on some criteria in use for the EDL process), **we recommend that the focus remains at programme level.**

The certification arrangements can differ based on multiple possible reasons, even beyond legislation. Testing the EDL criteria has proved this clarification to be crucial: several innovative joint programmes delivered by cooperation partnerships at the transnational level meet all the EDL criteria but fail to be considered suitable for the label. Why? Because these programmes do not lead to the award of a single joint degree, but to multiple or mixed combinations of degrees instead.

Given the primacy of the EDL criteria, an unclear understanding of the EDL and of such degree arrangements would lead to unequitable approaches for the graduates (since the European Degree aims to be awarded to the students).

Setting the conceptual framework will contribute to clarifying the way we define and understand the nature and role of the European Degree (label) and its connections with other tools and processes in higher education.

Currently, the EDL can be defined as either a seal of excellence assigned to joint programmes or as a distinctive certification (or accreditation) for joint educational programmes at a transnational level, delivered by cooperating higher education institutions across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), especially for programmes that lead to the award of joint degrees to the graduates.

Seen as an excellence hallmark for a specific range of future joint education programmes, EDL programmes adhere to a set of defined quality criteria that could support a new vision on standards. By aligning them also to a set of European shared values and policies, EDL programmes do not only meet high-demanding academic standards, but also foster a transnational, inclusive, student-centred, flexible and transformative learning environment for all students. Yet, while such premises lead the discussions and debates around the EDL, **a coherent conceptual framework needs to be set, also stating the impact of such a degree** on the qualification system, professional prospectives and on the quality assurance processes in place, not to mention on the educational offer that runs in parallel with the new degrees.

Widening the use of existing tools and processes

The EDL can become a stronger facilitator for streamlining and further developing some of the existing tools and processes in place for the design and implementation of joint educational programmes at the European level (Bologna tools), such as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and its wider adoption across all EHEA countries.

Such a process needs to be closely linked to a reconsideration of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) and to an increased trust and transparency in quality assurance systems and agencies, especially those registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). Further discussion and negotiation platforms are needed to enhance trust among partners and members states. The same goes for the harmonisation of quality assurance understandings in terms of joint educational offerings, especially for those that could lead to institutional accreditation of higher education institutions, based on transparent standards and high level of accountability in educational provision. The new models of joint educational programmes not only use but enhance the Bologna tools in place and foster common processes for the future, under umbrella concepts such as "European Approach", that can facilitate the wider promotion of joint practices in higher education.

Setting innovative and relevant criteria for a Joint European Degree

Following the preliminary results of the SMARTT project (which brings together 4 European Universities Alliances, 29 higher education institutions, and 15 ministries and quality assurance institutions) and the analysis on the proposed set of criteria for the establishment of a joint European degree label, we put forward some specific recommendations for designing the final list of criteria, such as:

1. Clarify/define of **"transnational"** in the context of Transnational joint degree delivery.
2. Clarify the **Transparency of Learning Outcomes** criterion with regards to the Intended Learning Outcomes and where those are visible to applicants and employers.
3. Explore, for the **Transnational Campus** criterion, the possibility to register student in all degree-awarding partner institutions for the full duration of the degree (provided there are procedures in place to avoid duplicate tuition fees).
4. Enhance the **virtual (digitally enhanced) mobility** component within the EDL.
5. Enhance the **labour market connection,** with regards to the work placement and internship components.
6. Reinforce the **visibility and awareness** criterion (from optional to mandatory).
7. Explore the inclusion of a new criterion relating to **institutional development of the academic and research components** through the joint degrees (potential integration with the European Research Area).
8. Consider the inclusion of an **employment criterion** (1 year after graduation) for programmes with at least one graduated cohort.
9. Explore the possibility of including an optional criterion regarding the **distribution of tasks and responsibility among partners** (e.g., Set of committees and rotating Chairs, change of coordinators with each funding period, etc.).
    a. This could be part of a new, separate criterion, under the Structural cluster, that would reflect indicators on **administrative and organisational effectiveness,** ensuring that minimum standards of collaboration among partner institutions are in place.
        i. A potential definition for the 'Administrative and Organisational Effectiveness' criterion would be: 'This criterion focuses on the internal infrastructure and operational mechanisms that institutions must establish to effectively introduce and sustain the European Degree Label. It underscores the importance of a coordinated, transparent, and efficient administrative framework that aligns with the overarching goals and standards of the EDL'.
        ii. The indicators could include administrative infrastructure, training and development, documentation, stakeholder communication, feedback

mechanisms, periodic internal reviews, collaboration framework, resource allocation, crisis management, transparency.

10. Consider including an optional criterion regarding the **quality of both educational provisions and of processes** (e.g., External International Advisory Board).

Approaching the implementation of a European Degree

Defining and articulating **a clear added value for the degree** is essential for its successful, wide implementation, both for policymakers and stakeholders involved in the process, and especially for members of the academic community and students. It is with the latter where the nature of the added value changes and adapts to more dynamic settings and needs.

It is essential that, based on the results of the pilot projects and the full roll-out of the label, continuous work is done to define a **coherent approach to the European Degree and to articulate it in relation to the higher education system and the particularities of each member state** and higher education institution. For this, some recommendations have been reached in the SMARTT project, in line with the view of the involved members states representatives and quality assurance agencies:

1. **Motivation:** Clarify the motivation for EDL development and implementation and clearly communicate it to the interested parties.

2. **Differentiation:** Clarify whether the EDL is based on an all-or-nothing approach, or whether the EDL could be awarded based on different levels or percentage of alignment (e.g., Bronze, Silver, Gold, etc.).
3. **Renewal:** Clarify if or how often the EDL should be renewed and how (particularly if awarded differentiated on percentage of alignment).
4. **Financial model:** Explore the possibility of creating or allowing for a new financial model to support joint degrees under the EDL.
5. **Financial incentives:** Consider offering financial incentives (grants) to institutions that may require significant resources to align to the EDL criteria.
6. **Integration with existing systems:** Where or if possible, ensure that EDL requirements and processes integrate seamlessly with existing academic systems and infrastructures to minimise disruption.
7. **Integration with other certifications:** Explore synergies and possible integrations with other academic certifications, quality assurance systems or labels to provide added value and reduce redundancy.

8. **Visibility:** Make the EDL more visible to all interested parties to ensure buy-in.

9. **Gradual deployment:** Explore a gradual deployment of the EDL that would entail several steps throughout a longer period, to allow stakeholders to better understand the process and its scope, and to foresee and address any potential resistance to implementation. Consider a pilot phase for deployment, first introducing EDL it to a small group of institutions. This will help identify any potential challenges or areas of improvement before a full-scale launch.
10. **Provide case-studies/best-practices examples:** Following the initial deployment, showcase a range of case studies highlighting how different programmes and institutions have successfully adopted and benefited from the EDL.

Tackling obstacles

The establishment of a Joint European Degree faces a series of challenges and obstacles at different stages and levels, as underlined by the piloting phase conducted in the SMARTT project. These

challenges need to be considered and tackled to allow the full roll-out of a European Degree (label) and the participation of higher education institutions and member states across the EHEA to this process. For some of the identified obstacles, some recommendations and ways forward are presented here to support the overall participation to the EDL process:

1. **Curriculum:** An EU-wide committee or body could be established to ensure the alignment with EDL criteria, to develop guidelines for consistent learning outcomes, to organise workshops and seminars to align EDL (self) assessment and validation methods, and to ensure curriculum relevance through continuous feedback surveys at the European level.

2. **Quality Assurance, Accreditation, Qualifications, and Standards:** EDL processes need to be streamlined based on successful programmes already implemented, while regular audits and evaluations would be needed to ensure parity with traditional methods, with the aim to develop a qualifications framework for the European Degrees.

3. **Recognition and Transferability:** Structural barriers need to be addressed through dialogue and support of legislative reforms at both the national and European levels, to streamline professional skill-validation processes and to enhance the reputation of the European Degrees.

4. **Administration, Governance, and Norms:** A common governance framework for EDL could be developed, reducing bureaucratic obstacles through e-governance and digital platforms, harmonising academic calendars, and enhancing stakeholder communication through collaborative platforms.

5. **Resources:** Joint research and education funding (such as Erasmus+ and Horizon) is needed to further support the establishment of a European Degree, encouraging cooperation among academics at the transnational level and enhancing global marketing campaigns to attract international students.

6. **Cultural Particularities:** Teaching and learning design and practices need to consider historical interpretations and cultural sensitivities, and new programmes need to strengthen multilingual learning environments and the development of language skills for students and teachers.

Key policy recommendations

To establish a cohesive and effective system that facilitates the development, recognition, and quality assurance of joint degree programs within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), some preliminary recommendations are proposed here, to guide the discussions and implementation processes of a Joint European Degree at European and national level:

1. **Harmonisation with existing policies and frameworks:** Align the EDL with existing European educational frameworks, particularly the Bologna Process, ECTS, and the European Quality Assurance Framework to ensure compatibility and ease of integration. Leverage existing tools like the Diploma Supplement to provide detailed information about EDL-accredited programmes.

2. **Quality Assurance and accreditation standards:** Develop specific quality assurance and accreditation standards for EDL-accredited programmes, ensuring they adhere to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). Facilitate the involvement of EQAR-registered agencies in the evaluation and accreditation processes for joint programmes.

3. **Transparency:** Include detailed information on programme structure, learning outcomes, assessment methods, and accreditation status. This transparency is crucial for student decision-making and stakeholder recognition.

4. **Flexible yet structured framework:** Create a framework that allows for flexibility in programme design to cater to different academic disciplines while maintaining a structured approach to

ensure consistency in quality and delivery. Allow for flexibility within the EDL framework to accommodate the evolving nature of higher education and the specific needs of different academic areas. Develop a standardised template for the EDL that accommodates the diversity of joint programmes while ensuring key information is uniformly presented. This includes degree titles, institutions involved, language of instruction, and mobility requirements.

5. **Digitalisation and technological integration:** Leverage digital technologies to facilitate the administration of the EDL, including digital certification, online platforms for information dissemination, and virtual learning components in programmes. Ensure the EDL's format is digitally compatible, facilitating its integration into various institutional systems and enabling easy access and verification by stakeholders, including employers and other educational institutions.

6. **Funding and incentives:** Provide financial support and incentives for institutions to develop and implement EDL-accredited programmes, including grants, research funding, and enhanced programme visibility. Implement policy measures that provide incentives for institutions to adopt the EDL, such as simplified accreditation processes, and recognition in national and European ranking systems.

7. **Enhanced mobility and cooperation:** Promote policies that facilitate student and staff mobility, including simplified visa processes and recognition of qualifications across EU M-member states. Encourage collaborations and partnerships beyond the EU to elevate the global standing of the EDL, its relevance and appeal to non-EU institutions. Prioritise student mobility and learning experiences in the EDL's design, ensuring that the label reflects a commitment to student-centred teaching and learning methodologies.

8. **Inclusivity and accessibility:** Implement policies to ensure the EDL is inclusive, adapted to diverse student populations, and promotes accessibility for disadvantaged or underrepresented groups.

9. **Data collection and research:** Conduct regular research and data collection to monitor the impact of the EDL on European higher education, labour market alignment, and student mobility.

10. **Stakeholder engagement and feedback:** Engage a wide range of stakeholders in the ongoing development and refinement of the EDL, including academic institutions, students, employers, and policymakers. Establish a feedback mechanism to continually assess the effectiveness and relevance of the EDL.

11. **Promotion and awareness campaigns:** Implement EU-wide promotion and awareness campaigns to highlight the value of the EDL and its accredited programmes to prospective students, employers, and the broader community.

Finally, CIVIS insists on the importance of considering the results and outcomes of the pilot projects that support the design and development of a European Degree (such as the SMARTT project) and the use of their results and outputs in the establishment of a coherent implementation process in cooperation with European Universities Alliances and the member states.

The upcoming European Commission Communication on a Joint European Degree is highly expected and welcomed, however, **a structured and open dialogue with the relevant policymakers, stakeholders, and actors at all levels is essential to fully integrate the results of the piloting process.** Such a policy initiative can be fully endorsed and supported if it reflects the shared vision of a wide academic community and the aims of a strong EHEA.

Background: CIVIS' place in the debate

<u>CIVIS, Europe's Civic University Alliance,</u> brings together the joint efforts of **17 higher education institutions from Europe and Africa** to transform and innovate education, research, and civic engagement through the development of a transnational academic community and the design and implementation of **joint educational programmes** and actions meant to **empower learners of all kinds with the right competencies and skills both them and society need for the future.**

As catalysts for innovation at the European level and beyond, European Universities Alliances act as strong facilitators for transformational approaches to higher education and as **experimentation grounds for the future models of educational programmes.** Alliances foster modernisation and change across the European educational system, both at national and regional levels, better responding to societal needs and dynamics. CIVIS's mission is to create **a truly unique European interuniversity campus** where students, academics, researchers, and staff will move and collaborate as freely as within their institution of origin and to develop a deep level of European integration, with the creation **joint and diverse learning pathways and** the development of complementary research facilities. Building on this mission, CIVIS actively contributes to the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and its visibility and competitiveness in a global educational market.

Taking advantage of the Alliance's broad experience in the development of joint educational programmes at all levels, starting from small scale learning units and programmes up to transnational degree programmes at bachelor, master, and doctoral level, CIVIS plays a significant role in the overall discussions about the development of a Joint European Degree policy initiative since the very beginning, in June 2022, in cooperation with the European Commission, members states, and other Universities Alliances.

Together with three other Alliances **(UNITA, Eutopia, and NeurotechEU),** different higher education institutions from Europe and Africa, and other stakeholders (ministries, quality assurance agencies, student bodies, etc.), CIVIS developed the **<u>SMARTT project</u>** to explore the potential added value and implementation scenarios of a European Degree, under the policy experimentation call of the European Commission. Through the project's actions and outcomes, several recommendations and directions have been drawn, in consultation with member states and several high-level experts in higher education development, which served as a basis for the key considerations presented in this paper, representing the first insights into the project's results expected for early spring of this 2024. CIVIS fully supports the inputs provided by the SMARTT project as a key stakeholder in the discussions around the design and implementation of a Joint European Degree (label) in the future.

About CIVIS, Europe's Civic University Alliance

CIVIS is **Europe's Civic University Alliance,** an endeavour for the long run that brings together **11 European Universities** and **6 African Partner Universities,** committed to working together to address the 21st-century challenges. The stakes are high, and rapid decisions based on scientific evidence are urgent regarding environment and climate change, health care, democracy and cultural heritage, sustainable and inclusive mobility, and digital transformations. By deepening our alliance's structural collaborations, the Alliance seeks to educate **an engaged generation of European citizens.**

Selected by the European Commission as one of the first 17 European Universities pilots, it brings together around half a million students and more than 70.000 staff members, including 37.400 academics and researchers.

CIVIS member universities:

Aix-Marseille Université (France) | National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece) | University of Bucharest (Romania) | Université libre de Bruxelles (Belgium) | Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain) | Sapienza Università di Roma (Italia) | Stockholm University (Sweden) | Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen (Germany) | University of Glasgow (UK) | Paris Lodron University of Salzburg (Austria) | University of Lausanne (Switzerland)

The Mediterranean zone and Africa are at the heart of CIVIS' global strategy, as CIVIS firmly believes that the future of Europe and that of Africa are intertwined. In 2022, CIVIS signed a partnership agreement with **6 strategic African partner universities:** Université Hassan II de Casablanca (Morocco) | University of Sfax (Tunisia) | Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (Senegal) | Makerere University (Uganda) | University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa) | Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Mozambique). This agreement commits CIVIS and its African partner universities to an ambitious agenda for partnership over the coming years, offering a framework for exciting and innovative new collaborations.

CIVIS aims to create **a truly unique European interuniversity campus** where students, academics, researchers, and staff will move and collaborate as freely as within their institution of origin. The Alliance aims to develop a deep level of European integration, involving joint learning pathways, development of complementary research facilities and diverse degree pathways. Based on the solid and innovative education and scientific activity in each institution, CIVIS will unite efforts and experiences to develop a European University with strong links to its local social and geographical environment and an orientation toward global challenges. It will contribute to the social, cultural, and economic dynamism at both a local and global scale.

Visit civis.eu to learn more.