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# Deliverable 7 (D3.2.)

## Final recommendations of the SMARTT project

March 2024



***SMARTT (Screening, mapping, analyzing, recommending, transferring and transforming HE international programmes)***

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## ABOUT THE SMARTT PROJECT

**SMARTT** is an innovative project aiming at analysing, testing, and piloting the new European Degree label criteria, improving the quality, and increasing the transferability of future developments of European Degrees across Europe and beyond.

**SMARTT** is formed by the **CIVIS - Europe's Civic University Alliance** in cooperation with the European Universities Alliances EUTOPIA, NEUROTECHEU, and UNITA, alongside higher education institutions, national and regional stakeholders, and relevant actors. Based on significant experience in designing and delivering joint and multiple degree programmes at transnational level, the higher education institutions involved in the SMARTT project propose to expand this experience and draw, based on clear methodologies and thorough analyses, recommendations, and proposals both for the European Commission and the member states, to support the development of a European Approach for designing and implementing Joint European Degrees in the future. The consortium partners possess an extensive history of successful international collaboration and have consistently played a leading role in the co-development of the European Degree policy initiative since its inception.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report reflects the main results of the SMARTT Project, together with specific SMARTT recommendations for the development and implementation of the European Degree Label (EDL) and the Joint European Degree (JED).

The landscape of European higher education is evolving towards more interoperable and unified systems across the continent, significantly influenced by initiatives like the Bologna Process (BP) and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Education Area (EEA). These efforts aim to enhance student and scholar mobility, ensure academic qualification recognition, and foster transnational partnerships.

Introduced as a policy experimentation by the European Commission in 2022, the EDL aims to symbolize excellence in transnational education, enhancing the visibility and attractiveness of European higher education globally. It serves as a quality seal for joint degree programs. The SMARTT Report outlines a three-stage phased approach to implementing and expanding the EDL towards a JED, based on extensive analysis and stakeholder feedback. The phases — Emerging, Converging, and Merging — detail strategic steps for enhancing educational frameworks, fostering inclusiveness, and supporting lifelong learning.

**The Emerging Phase:** Focuses on the development and deployment of the EDL. Recommendations include clearer differentiation and definitions of program types, the organization of EDL criteria into thematic clusters for clarity, and a proposed awarding process emphasizing institutional autonomy.

**The Converging Phase:** Envisions a clear definition and national adoption of the JED, building on the groundwork laid by the EDL. It anticipates significant resources and a collective commitment to develop and implement JEDs.

**The Merging Phase:** Represents the full deployment of JEDs, which would automatically include the EDL as a seal of quality, marking the culmination of this initiative.

The SMARTT Report proposes a comprehensive and phased approach to enhancing the quality, competitiveness, and unity of European higher education through the EDL and JED. These recommendations aim to build on existing frameworks and initiatives, ensuring a cohesive and innovative educational landscape across Europe.

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AMU</b>	– Aix-Marseille Université (France)
<b>BIP</b>	– Blended Intensive Programmes
<b>BP</b>	– Bologna Process
<b>EA</b>	– European Approach
<b>EC</b>	– European Commission
<b>ECTS</b>	– European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
<b>EDL</b>	– European Degree Label
<b>EEA</b>	– European Education Area
<b>ETF</b>	– European Training Foundation
<b>EHEA</b>	– European Higher Education Area
<b>ENIC/NARIC</b>	– European Network of Information Centres/National Academic Recognition Information Centres
<b>EQAR</b>	– European Quality Assurance Register
<b>EQF</b>	– European Qualifications Framework
<b>ESG</b>	– European Standards and Guidelines (for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area)
<b>EUROSUD</b>	– The International Master in South European Studies
<b>HEI</b>	– Higher Education Institutions
<b>JED</b>	– Joint European Degree
<b>NKUA</b>	– National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece)
<b>NQF</b>	– National Qualifications Framework
<b>PLUS</b>	– Paris Lodron University of Salzburg (Austria)
<b>QA</b>	– Quality Assurance
<b>QF-EHEA</b>	– Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area
<b>SMARTT</b>	– Screening, mapping, analysing, recommending, transferring, and transforming HE international programmes
<b>SU</b>	– Stockholm University (Sweden)
<b>SUR</b>	– Sapienza Università di Roma (Italy)
<b>UAM</b>	– Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain)
<b>UB</b>	– University of Bucharest (Romania)
<b>ULB</b>	– Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium)
<b>UofG</b>	– University of Glasgow (Scotland)
<b>UNIL</b>	– University of Lausanne (Switzerland)
<b>UT</b>	– Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen (Germany)

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# ABOUT THE SMARTT PROJECT

Objectives, approach, and results

## Introduction

In partnership with three other alliances ([UNITA](#), [Eutopia](#), and [NeurotechEU](#)), and numerous stakeholders (including ministries, quality assurance agencies, and student organizations), the [CIVIS Alliance](#) initiated the [SMARTT project](#). This project aimed to assess the potential benefits and operational frameworks of a European Degree, as part of a policy experimentation initiative by the European Commission. The project's activities and findings have yielded several recommendations and strategic directions, developed in consultation with member states and experts in higher education. These form the foundation of the key considerations outlined in this report, providing insights into the project's outcomes. CIVIS endorses the contributions of the SMARTT project as a principal participant in the dialogue concerning the future design and implementation of a Joint European Degree label.

The specific objectives of SMARTT are:

- **Mapping the different regulations** and goals at the national and European levels
- Establishing a **catalogue of indicators for European criteria**.
  - Propose an **approach that could be commonly agreed** on for the delivery of joint degrees based on co-created European criteria by European countries at all education levels.
  - **Testing** the relevance of these criteria.
  - Conducting a **joint reflection** on possible scenarios for the delivery of a joint degree at all levels, based on these co-created European criteria.
  - Exploring and recommending possible **optimization** of the proposed set of criteria.
  - Sharing **good practices** at all levels.
- Organizing a large **dissemination** event and elaborating **materials**.

## The SMARTT approach

The European Degree Label (EDL) can be seen as a crucial project, or as a `European policy experimentation in higher education` initiative (European Commission, 2022), considering the ever-changing and increasingly complex educational landscape. Building on the Bologna Process and the expanding potential of the EHEA, the EDL proposes a seal of quality for joint degree programs, signifying a commitment to excellence in transnational education and enhancing the visibility and attractiveness of European higher education globally.

In this context, SMARTT is an innovative project aiming at analysing, testing, and piloting the new European Degree label criteria, improving the quality, and increasing the transferability of future developments of European Degrees across Europe and beyond.

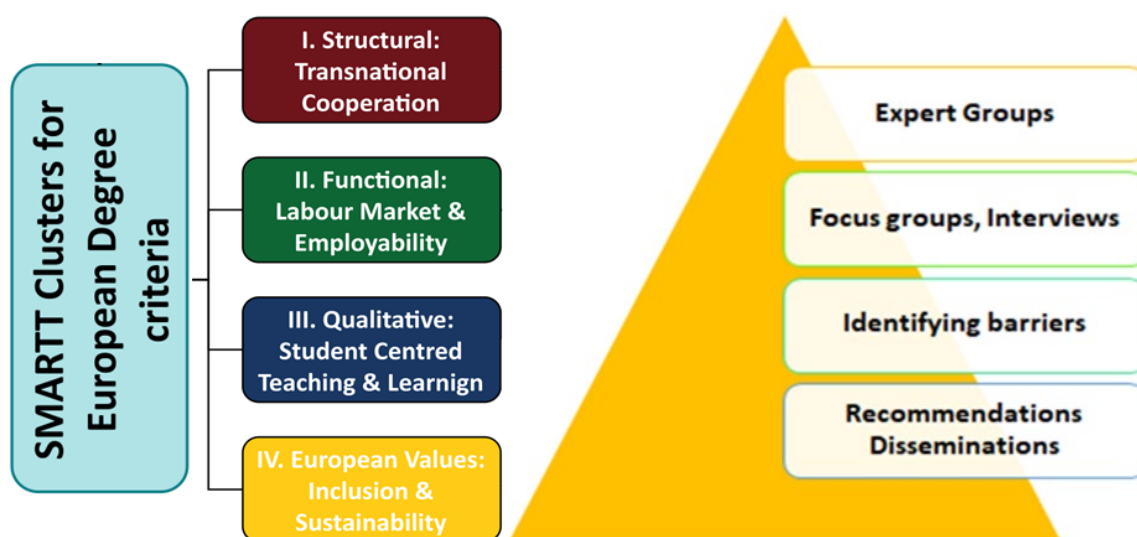
To address these objectives, two distinct phases were delineated, under the leadership of Work Package 2 (WP2) and Work Package 3 (WP3).



## 1. Phase one: EUROSUD

The first step, led by University of Bucharest in WP2, had a special focus on an already existing Erasmus Mundus Master “EUROSUD”. The documents D2.1, D2.1 and D2.3 compile the [recommendations on EUROSUD](#) and outline a comprehensive and innovative process for analysing, testing, and piloting the EDL criteria, with a particular focus on its alignment with the EUROSUD program.

The first drafts of the European Degree label criteria analysis and indicators have been created by the SMARTT Experts Group. For this work, the European Degree label criteria proposed by the European Commission were organized in four clusters looking at structural, operational, qualitative, and transversal dimensions of the pilot to support the clarification of the criteria and descriptors used for setting indicators and measures of achievement and testing.



A methodology was established based on 6 steps:

### I. Iterative Process for Recommendations:

The methodology employed an iterative process, where each step builds upon the previous one, ensuring flexibility and a thorough analysis. This approach facilitates the integration of insights and feedback at various stages, enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of the recommendations.

### II. Comprehensive Stakeholder Engagement:

The process included a broad range of stakeholders, such as students, alumni, faculty, staff, management teams, experts, and external stakeholders. This diverse engagement ensures that the recommendations consider multiple perspectives, enhancing the robustness and inclusivity of the EDL criteria.

### III. Pre-Test Alignment and Criteria Review:

A distinctive feature of the process is the pre-test alignment of the EUROSUD program against the EDL criteria, combined with a detailed review of these criteria. This step not only assessed the current alignment but also helped identify specific areas for improvement, making the criteria more actionable and meaningful.

#### IV. Use of Mixed Methods Research:

The methodology incorporated a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and surveys. This mixed-methods approach provided a rich dataset for analysis, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the alignment between the EUROSUD program and the EDL criteria.

#### V. Development of a Selection Questionnaire:

The creation of a selection questionnaire to map out CIVIS programs based on the EDL criteria represents an original contribution to the process. This tool is instrumental in identifying programs that align with the EDL, facilitating the application and assessment process.

#### VI. Thematic Clustering of EDL Criteria:

One of the recommendations was to organize the EDL criteria into thematic clusters, such as Structural, Functional, Qualitative, and European Values. This novel approach to structuring the criteria aims to provide a clearer and more focused overview, enhancing understanding and application.

The [document D5](#) offers strategic recommendations addressing obstacles related to curriculum, quality assurance, recognition, administration, and resources. This holistic view of potential challenges and solutions emphasizes the need to enhance the virtual mobility component and strengthen the connection to the labour market, reflecting the evolving dynamics of higher education and the needs of students and employers.

The benefit of initially applying the EDL criteria to a singular program, such as EUROSUD, before extending the evaluation to over 50 programs, provided several **key benefits:**

<b>Gap Identification</b>	This initial testing phase allowed for the precise determination of how well the EDL criteria matched the existing structures of the program and pinpointed areas requiring enhancements.
<b>Indicator Development</b>	It was possible to create and refine specific indicators, ensuring the criteria are both theoretically robust and implementable across varied educational programmes. Testing the criteria with one program before a wider rollout helped elucidate the EDL criteria, facilitating easier understanding. This clarity is essential for ensuring the criteria's broad potential future acceptance and implementation.
<b>Iterative Refinement</b>	Beginning with a single program offered the flexibility to iteratively refine the EDL criteria based on real-world feedback. This process was essential for addressing the nuances of different degree programs.
<b>Engagement &amp; Feedback</b>	This preliminary phase fostered extensive interaction with stakeholders, including students, faculty, and program administrators associated with EUROSUD.
<b>Scaling</b>	The lessons learned here provide a foundation for expanding the evaluation process to a broader cohort of programs, offering a methodical approach for broader application.
<b>Risk Reduction</b>	Identifying potential issues and challenges with the EDL criteria in the context of one program helps mitigate risks that could emerge when broadening the application to more programs.

## 2. Phase two: 50 international programmes

The **second phase** of the SMARTT project led by Sapienza University of Rome in WP3 was structured into three operational phases: pre-screening of programs, internal selection of programs, and validation of results based on EDL criteria adherence.

The main goals of the methodological approach in this phase provided a detailed framework for evaluating programs within the CIVIS alliance and associate partners, assessed adherence to the European Degree Label criteria and joint program standards, and identified best practices for program development and refinement. The approach involves a structured process of data collection, analysis, and validation to check the alignment with European quality standards and the transferability of criteria in international degrees across institutions.

WP3 expanded upon the groundwork laid by WP2, employing tools and methodologies initially developed and tested with the EUROSUD program across a broader array of over 50 programs within the CIVIS Alliance and its partner networks. This second phase aimed to validate the European Degree Label criteria across an extended list of programs and educational initiatives spearheaded by CIVIS Alliance universities. By applying the screening and testing procedures on a grander scale, the project encompassed a wide array of regional and local contexts, fields of study, and program types. It aimed to broaden the scope of recommendations and strategies for a pan-European framework on European Degrees, extending its applicability across a more diverse geographical and educational spectrum. This report also draws upon the insights from EUROSUD Report on quantitative and qualitative analysis and set of recommendations on EUROSUD.

The evaluation process includes a systematic review of program documentation, interviews with program coordinators, and feedback from stakeholders. Data collected from the evaluation process are analysed to determine the extent to which programs meet the EDL criteria and joint program standards. This analysis helps identify areas of strength and areas for improvement in program design and implementation.

### 2.a. The SMARTT selection questionnaire

The SMARTT Selection Questionnaire was aimed at validating the European Degree Label criteria against the selected CIVIS and partners' programmes. Apart from being used as a selection tool for programs that would later participate in the SMARTT Survey, the selection questionnaire also allowed us to map the existing programs in CIVIS in relation to the EDL.

**Three functional stages were envisaged:** initial program screening, internal program selection, and confirmation of outcomes according to adherence to EDL criteria.

### Phase I: Pre-screening of Programs

**Data Collection:** The phase involved collecting program data from partner universities to identify programs for further validation. As anticipated, the CIVIS partners actively contributed to the project, sending a total of 95 programs (85 university partners, 3 Neurotech- European University of brain and technology and 7 UNITA- Universitas Montium), whose coordinators answered multiple questions related to the 20 criteria proposed by the European Union to which specific scores were assigned.

**Selection Criteria:** Programs were validated against the EDL criteria, general standards for joint programs, and structural principles.

**Operational Phases:** The phase was divided into three steps, including the development of the survey tool, internal selection procedures, and result analysis.

**Objective:** The objective was to collect programs for further validation and case studies, with Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and Sapienza University of Rome leading this phase.

## Phase II: Internal selection of programmes

**Data Cleaning:** The phase involved cleaning data matrices and conducting plausibility and congruence checks to ensure data accuracy.

**Scoring System:** Programs were assigned specific scores for each variable based on pre-coded questionnaire responses.

**Statistical Analysis:** Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to assess program adherence to the EDL criteria and joint program standards. The Joint Degree Programmes presented by the coordinators in this first phase of the survey were the types of programmes in line with the European Union directives and have, on average, the highest number of criteria included in the EDL Criteria (91%). In addition to the Joint Degree Programmes, another considerable share is represented by the so-called "mixed programmes", i.e. those that arise from the combination of Joint & Multiple Degree Programmes (81%). On the other hand, the programmes that are most distant from the European Union directives and on which they should most integrate indicators or factors that fall within the EDL Criteria are the Multiple Degree Programmes - which only 3 (37.5%) of the programmes were found to comply with the EDL Criteria while the remaining 5 (62.5%) do not - and the Double Degree Programmes which, despite being the most numerous types of programs (35), the largest number of programs (35, 48.5%) obtained a rather low total score on the variables of the questionnaire, resulting in little compliance with the EDL Criteria

**Objective:** The objective was to attribute scores to programs and prepare for detailed statistical analysis of the collected data.

## Phase III: Validation of results

**List of Programs:** The phase focused on validating results and creating a list of programs and their adherence to the EDL criteria.

**Final Assessment:** Programs were analysed based on their alignment with European quality standards and the extent to which they met the EDL criteria.

**Objective:** The objective was to finalize the evaluation process and provide a comprehensive assessment of program quality within the CIVIS alliance and partner institutions.

### 2.b. The SMARTT survey

The WP2 and WP3 leaders developed the general approach for the SMARTT survey and the specific instrument and oversaw the data collection process. The SMARTT survey was initially carried out in a pre-testing phase on EUROSUD, to allow for the revision of the final version of the survey, that was later disseminated throughout the 50+ CIVIS and partner programmes.

The SMARTT Survey's primary aim was to gather valuable insights into the application and relevance of the European Degree Label (EDL) criteria within existing joint degree programmes. Through the responses, we sought to understand how the EDL criteria align with the specificities and objectives of selected programmes, and how these criteria might be refined or enhanced to better support the development and recognition of high-quality joint degree programs across Europe.

The survey captured diverse viewpoints from ten European countries, showcasing feedback from twenty-six coordinating universities and fifty programs, which, in turn, involved collaboration with over one hundred partner universities globally.

Administered from December 2023 through February 2024 via the SoSci Survey platform, the survey upheld strict data privacy and accessibility standards. The survey featured fifty-four multiple-choice questions based on a five-point scale, complemented by ten open-ended inquiries, gathering the views of representatives from ninety-five double, multiple, and joint programs across fourteen HEIs within the CIVIS network and its partner alliances. It aimed to assess perceptions of the EDL criteria and the quality of programs, employing pre-defined meta-criteria, and leveraging Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour as its analytical framework. Respondents evaluated their agreement with various statements, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree," providing valuable feedback on the EDL criteria's clarity, relevance, specificity, measurability, flexibility, readiness, and consistency.

The analysis focused on **a wide range of joint degree programmes** including Joint Degrees, Double Degrees, Dual Degrees, Multiple Degrees, and Mixed Degrees, across various fields of study such as Arts, Humanities, Social Science, STEM, Health and Human Care, and Transdisciplinary or Mixed areas. This diverse selection aimed to evaluate the EDL criteria's applicability and relevance across a broad spectrum of academic disciplines and program structures.

The survey examined the alignment of the selected programmes with the EDL criteria, employing a comprehensive methodological framework for evaluation. Key areas of focus included the structure and cooperation of educational institutions across transnational contexts, the relevance and alignment of the EDL criteria with program outcomes, the clarity and understanding of these criteria by program coordinators, and the specifics of how these programmes met the standards of quality assurance, innovative learning approaches, inclusiveness, sustainability, and multilingualism.

The analysis aimed to provide evidence-based insights to inform the ongoing development of the EDL, highlighting the criteria's strengths and weaknesses as perceived by program coordinators. This included identifying best practices and lessons learned from existing joint degree programs that could inform the refinement of the EDL.

## Analysis of the SMARTT survey

The findings from this survey are instrumental for program coordinators, administrators, and policy makers, providing them with critical insights to elevate the quality of programs, ensure they align with EDL criteria, and facilitate strategic planning for joint programs. The comprehensive analysis of the SMARTT Survey can be consulted in the [D13 SMARTT Deliverable](#). The main results of the SMARTT survey that are relevant for policymakers within the CIVIS alliance and partner institutions include:

### 1. Alignment with EDL Criteria

- The survey revealed that while most programs aligned well with the EDL criteria related to student support services, there were gaps in areas such as joint curriculum development and internationalization strategies.

- The survey identified that programs excelled in meeting the EDL criteria related to student mobility but struggled with criteria concerning the integration of digital technologies in teaching. Resources for training faculty on digital tools need to be allocated along with the promotion of best practices in technology-enhanced learning to address this gap.

## 2. Perceptions of Stakeholders

- Positive perceptions of the EDL criteria and program quality were identified among stakeholders that expressed high levels of satisfaction with the clarity and transparency of program objectives and outcomes.
- Stakeholders expressed strong support for interdisciplinary collaboration within joint programs but raised concerns about the clarity of assessment criteria. There is a need for workshops on effective assessment practices and to provide guidelines to ensure consistency and transparency in evaluation processes.

## 3. Attitudes and Intentions

- Insights into stakeholders' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control towards the adoption of EDL criteria were obtained.
- The survey indicated that while stakeholders showed a positive attitude towards adopting the EDL criteria, there were concerns about the resources and support needed for successful implementation.
- Some stakeholders expressed reservations about the administrative burden of documentation of the potential EDL. There is a need for clear templates for reporting and provide administrative support to ease the implementation of EDL.

## 4. Feedback on Readiness and Flexibility

- Stakeholders expressed varying levels of readiness to adapt to changes in accreditation requirements and educational trends.
- Support programs are clearly needed by offering professional development opportunities and providing guidance on navigating regulatory changes to ensure programs remain flexible and responsive.
- Stakeholders highlighted the need for greater flexibility in program structures to accommodate diverse student needs and preferences. It will be good to encourage the development of customizable pathways within joint programs, allowing students to tailor their learning experiences to align with their career goals and interests.

## 5. Identification of Best Practices

- The survey highlighted a successful joint degree program that implemented innovative assessment methods to enhance student learning outcomes.
- Identified best practices across European HEI's can encourage knowledge sharing and provide support for implementing similar strategies in other programs to improve overall quality.

- A successful joint program was commended for its robust mentorship program that supported student well-being and academic success. It can promote the adoption of mentorship initiatives across other programs, emphasizing the positive impact on student retention and satisfaction.

## 6. Recommendations for Improvement

- Based on survey findings, recommendations were made to enhance the alignment of program elements with the EDL criteria, such as integrating more international perspectives into the curriculum and strengthening collaboration with industry partners.
- A need to work with program coordinators to implement recommendations and monitor progress can be an option.
- Survey results indicated a lack of clarity in communication channels between program coordinators and stakeholders, leading to misunderstandings about program objectives.

## 7. Applicability of EDL Criteria

- Stakeholders provided feedback on the applicability of specific EDL criteria in their programs, highlighting challenges in meeting certain standards related to quality assurance and student mobility.
- A need to revise and refine the EDL criteria was stated to ensure that criteria are clearly defined, relevant and achievable for all programs.
- Stakeholders provided feedback on the relevance of specific EDL criteria in the context of emerging fields such as artificial intelligence and sustainability. The collaboration with industry experts should be improved to reflect current trends and ensure that joint programs remain at the forefront of innovation.

By considering these main results of the SMARTT survey, policy makers can make informed decisions, implement targeted interventions, and drive continuous improvement in program quality and alignment with European standards within the CIVIS alliance and partner institutions.

## Recommendations from the SMARTT Survey

- Counteract the neutrality by disseminating more detailed information about the objectives, advantages, and implementation specifics of the EDL. This could be achieved through workshops, frequently asked questions (FAQs), or comprehensive guides.
- Establish precise metrics and standards for assessing adherence to the EDL criteria and tracking programs' progress toward alignment with the EDL, which could help diminish uncertainty.
- Enhance engagement with all relevant parties to better comprehend their expectations and ensure that the EDL criteria adequately represent the diverse needs of all stakeholders, including students, faculty, and industry partners.
- Showcase exemplary examples or situations where alignment with the EDL has had a positive effect on similar programs, to underscore the potential advantages and foster wider acceptance.

- Identify and tackle known obstacles to the implementation of the EDL, possibly by providing specific support, resources, and advice tailored to various areas of programming.
- Maintain the EDL criteria's relevance and effectiveness by conducting periodic evaluations and modifications, integrating input from an extensive array of stakeholders.
- Promote internal support by acknowledging and rewarding initiatives to meet the EDL standards, thereby cultivating advocates within the program who can motivate others and facilitate the alignment process.

Recommendations derived from the survey outcomes could serve as a roadmap for future endeavours aimed at augmenting program clarity, relevance, and overall excellence at least within the CIVIS alliance and its partnering institutions.

## 2.c. Interviews and focus-groups

Interviews and focus-groups with relevant stakeholders were planned and were carried out along with informal formal conversations throughout this second stage of the process. The focus groups and interviews conducted highlight the perspectives of representatives of Education Ministries and National Quality Agencies on the EDL criteria and implementation scenarios, offering insights into the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified.



Policymakers and program coordinators can use these findings to refine the EDL criteria, address challenges, and capitalize on opportunities to improve program quality and alignment with European standards.



## Main findings from Ministries & Quality Assurance Agencies

Criteria recommendations	Majority favour reducing criteria over adding.
	Internationalization, mobility, and QA arrangements deemed most crucial.
	Importance placed on joint program implementation and employability.
	Mixed opinions on multilingualism due to potential limitations for universities sharing official languages.
	Calls for clearer definition of criteria and their indicators.
	Suggestion to make all optional criteria mandatory, with emphasis on quality and alternative learning formats.
	Flexibility recommended for mandatory services on transnational campuses and minimum ECTS/mobility months.
	Addition of research-related criteria suggested.
	Restructuring of criteria in line with EA proposed, including mandatory EA usage.
	EDL should consider ESG criteria to avoid redundancy.
	European values criteria need thorough discussion regarding ownership, interest, and measurement methods.
Importance of administrative staff's involvement highlighted.	
Call for better understanding and flexibility regarding national differences related to criteria.	
Implementation scenarios	EC preferred for awarding due to better recognition and overcoming national barriers.
	National QA or authority are seen as powerful decision-makers, but EC intervention in quality assurance is unusual.
	Universities self-awarding generates doubts; proximity to desired HE levels.
	Various QA agencies could potentially collaborate under ESG guidelines for EDL.
	QA agencies should validate joint criteria; trust placed in those registered in the European framework.
	Possible creation of an external quality assurance body to issue the EDL label.
	The European Approach (EA) is seen as bureaucratically complex, expensive, and not fully legislated, yet recognized as a sound methodology by some.
	Potential confusion between EA and EDL regarding QA, with suggestions to align EDL more closely with ESG criteria.
EA is seen as the already existing tool that should be enhance but revised and make it compulsory somehow	

## Added value

Results show that the respondents see in the EDL an opportunity to solve existing barriers. The implementation of the EDL could streamline the QA process, offering an alternative to the bureaucratic hurdles and complexities seen in joined programs. It could also use available means such as the Erasmus Mundus and the European Approach to merge, respectively, funding and excellence in this new label.

Additionally, it could enhance the reputation of the programs by providing students with an extra label and positioning the program internationally. This could have a positive impact on the employability of students and increase the attractiveness and visibility of universities.

Finally, exploring the feasibility and implementation of the EDL is triggering institutional reflection on excellence and quality in programs.

## Criteria recommendations

The focus groups and interviews results reveal a predominant preference among participants for reducing criteria rather than adding in the evaluation of joint programs. There is an exception advocating for the addition of criteria concerning research, aligning with the mission of HEIs. Also, criteria should raise the importance of the administrative staff's inclusion in all these procedures.

There is a general focus on requiring clarity, quality, and adaptability to diverse institutional contexts. Some propose making mandatory all optional criteria, placing emphasis on quality criteria and the ones that offer tangible benefits, like alternative learning formats. There are also suggestions to be flexible about mandatory services for transnational campuses, and about the minimum ECTS and mobility months. For some that defend the use of EA over the EDL, there's also a suggestion to restructure criteria according to the EA and include its mandatory use. Others recommend that the EDL should consider the ESG criteria to not double-check.

Among the criteria considered most relevant are internationalization, mobility, and QA arrangements. Additionally, aspects such as the implementation of the joint program and employability are also deemed significant. There are mixed opinions regarding the importance of multilingualism. While it's generally acknowledged as valuable, some participants expressed concerns that it could be limiting for universities from countries that share the same language.

A special mention should be made of the European values cluster criteria, which requires a major discussion, with questions raised about ownership, intention, and measurement methods.

## Implementation scenarios

### **Awarding**

A predominant viewpoint emerges favouring the involvement of national quality assurance (QA) bodies or authorities. This preference is rooted in their authoritative capacity to make decisions regarding diploma issuance. Participants highlight the uncommon nature of European Commission (EC) intervention in this process, noting that QA responsibilities typically lie within the domain of specialized quality agencies. As such, there's a prevailing sentiment that these agencies should be entrusted with the task of issuing the EDL.

However, amidst this consensus, there are dissenting voices advocating for EC involvement. Those in favour argue that the EC's intervention could overcome national barriers, leading to better recognition and projection of the diploma on an international scale. They emphasize the potential for the EC to

streamline processes and ensure consistent standards across member states, ultimately enhancing the EDL's credibility and impact.

The notion of universities self-awarding the EDL prompts scepticism among participants. While some express doubts about the reliability of such a system, others contend that if implemented, it should closely align with higher education (HE) level standards. The acceptability of self-awarding hinges on the criteria in place and the authority tasked with verifying compliance.

Participants propose various solutions to navigate these complexities. Some suggest that multiple QA agencies could collaborate under a unified framework, such as the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), to ensure consistency and reliability in EDL issuance. This collaborative approach seeks to leverage the expertise of diverse agencies while maintaining coherence and quality assurance standards.

### ***Role of quality assurance***

The prevailing sentiment is that QA agencies should be responsible for validating the joint criteria. This consensus is echoed by multiple participants, who assert that if these agencies are registered in the EQAR, they should be deemed reliable and competent to carry out QA procedures for the EDL. Furthermore, there's a strong belief in the trustworthiness of QA agencies listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The discussion also aligns with the principles of the European Approach (EA), with participants asserting that countries must recognize the QA processes conducted by agencies in other member states. This reciprocity ensures mutual trust and facilitates the acceptance of the EDL across borders.

Moreover, there was a consensus that any agency affiliated with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) should be permitted to play a role in the EDL process. These agencies are viewed as having the necessary expertise and credibility to contribute effectively to QA efforts. Participants highlighted the readiness of QA agencies that currently evaluate European Alliances, indicating their preparedness to implement a guide specifically tailored for the EDL.

In addition to these perspectives, some participants advocated for a different approach, suggesting the creation of an external QA body dedicated solely to the EDL. This alternative proposal aims to ensure specialized attention and focus on the quality assurance processes specific to the diploma.

### ***European approach***

There are mixed feelings about the role of the European Approach in the EDL proposal. A slight majority of responses in favour of implementing EA as a priority, while another big percentage of respondents consider the EA complex and the EDL an opportunity to allow more flexibility. Also, there's a note about potential confusion between EA and the EDL regarding QA. This suggests a need for clarification or differentiation between the two.

Among the reasons to prioritize the EA over the EDL, the respondents view it as a sound methodology, simple and concrete, to externally assess QA of joint programs. They prioritize its full implementation and question the necessity of additional instruments for accreditation or QA. The main concern to this is the barriers imposed by national legislation. Some countries are implementing reforms to use EA in all kinds of joint programs. Others find it impossible to implement since it is not in their legislation, and refer to its complexity due to bureaucracy, stating that the EA should be updated. This is the main reason why the big percentage differs from prioritizing the EA over the EDL. And the opportunity for EDL to bring light to the situation.

Among the possibilities, the respondents suggested that EDL would bring up questions and flexibility that the EA doesn't allow, e.g. who is entitled to social or medical help, or provide flexibility in evaluation. Recommendations are made to provide specific indications within member states' frameworks to allow for flexible evaluation of alliances/joint programs, indicating a need for adaptability in assessment processes. Some also proposed to apply ESGs approach to QA to facilitate recognition, indicating a potential alternative or complementary method to EA.

## Main findings from students

### Student's concerns while selecting a programme

- Emphasis on the importance of soft/transversal skills alongside academic knowledge in educational programs.
- Recognition of the practicality of skills needed in the labour market.
- Quality of practicum experiences as a major attraction in programs.
- Proposal for internships to be mandatory in new educational programs to gain practical skills and experience.
- Consideration of rankings and branding to make programs more appealing to students.

### EDL added value

- International career opportunities with continuous learning and adaptability in the labour market.
- Encourages multilingualism and provides an environment for language learning.
- Enhances mobility between countries, workplaces, and universities.
- Increases attractiveness and marketability of programs through branding and recognition.
- Opportunities for dual degrees from multiple institutions, enhancing validity and suitability for jobs.

### EDL & employability

- Promotion of proactive engagement in practical experiences, rather than passive observation, improves employability by providing valuable skills and experience.
- Internships connected to students' interests, conducted in reputable institutions, and well-organized contribute significantly to employability.
- Ensuring quality and organization of internships, potentially in European institutions, enhances their appeal and effectiveness in preparing students for the labour market.
- Paid internships provide additional incentives and opportunities for students to gain relevant work experience.

### Selection of a programme with EDL

- **Higher institution hierarchy:** Appeal of attending a prestigious institution enhances attractiveness for students.

- **Dual Degrees and validity:** Opportunity to obtain degrees from multiple reputable institutions increases credibility and suitability for positions.
- **Recognition and suitability for jobs:** Having degrees from multiple institutions qualifies students as suitable candidates for employment opportunities.
- **Informing students and promoting awareness:** Importance of informing students about the existence and benefits of EDL study programs.
- **Clarifying added value:** Need to articulate and present the added value and benefits of EDL programs to students for informed decision-making.

Students propose more practical and proactive approaches to internships within EDL programs, emphasizing the need for tangible skills and hands-on experience that align with labour market demands. They suggest that programs could offer guidance by providing lists of company profiles or internship opportunities, thus aiding students in making meaningful career connections. Transparency about the benefits of the EDL and joint programs is deemed crucial for attracting students and ensuring they are well-informed about their options. Additionally, including students in the quality assurance processes at national and European levels is seen as essential for capturing and incorporating student feedback into program evaluations and development.

In summary, students underscore the EDL's role in enhancing the educational landscape by fostering international competencies, practical skills, and a deepened understanding of European values. Their recommendations focus on ensuring that EDL criteria and joint programs are designed with a clear, practical benefit to students, highlighting the need for transparency, inclusivity, and direct engagement with the labour market. By addressing these aspects, the EDL can more effectively meet the needs and expectations of its student beneficiaries, thereby enriching the educational experience and outcomes of European joint programs.

## Main findings from experts

### EDL criteria

- Quality assurance should align with ESG and European Approach.
- Catalogue of indicators should closely relate to ESG, with additional criteria as needed.
- Consider the optional criteria point system for flexibility.
- Some indicators could be optional or compulsory, based on importance.
- Criteria should differentiate between essential and non-essential information. Define the alliance "flavour" with both compulsory and optional criteria.
- Differentiated approach needed for bachelor/master and doctoral levels.
- Flexibility in bilateral cooperation for JEDL recommended.
- Concerns about Criteria Complexity:
- Overly complex criteria may compromise universities' independence and deter participation.
  - Proposal for funding attached to joint degree program development to incentivize participation.
  - Emphasis on inclusivity, covering various types of learners, with noted difficulties for work-linked training.

## Comments on specific criteria

- **Geopolitical scope:** Eligibility clarification required for institutions worldwide or limited to EHEA countries.
- **Transnational Joint Degree delivery:**
  - The French legal framework allows joint degree diplomas with conditions.
  - Flexibility needed in template for more than three partner institutions.
  - Digitization through EBSI-VECTOR project recommended.
- **Transparency of Learning Outcomes:** Diploma supplement issuance remains optional due to manual work until automation is available.
- **Joint Policies:**
  - Common policy implications for admission and assessment pose challenges.
  - Current process focuses on pre-admission.
- **Multilingualism:**
  - Suggestion to make multilingualism criterion optional to accommodate same-language partnerships.
  - Consider making language classes compulsory to emphasize language diversity.
- **Innovative Learning Approaches:** Proposal to make innovative learning approaches criterion optional to avoid exclusivity.
- **Graduate Outcomes:**
  - EUROGRADUATE survey categories clarification needed.
  - Make labour market cooperation compulsory.
  - Expand mobility criteria to include various types of mobility.
- **Democratic values and societal needs:** Awareness of EU values should be compulsory, potentially integrated into courses.

## European Degree Label (EDL) and European Approach (EA)

- EDL should complement but not replace joint degree accreditation.
- Synchronization with national regulations necessary.
- Double accreditation (national/EDL and EA/EDL) could be an obstacle.
- Proposal for EQAR-agencies to offer double accreditation for efficiency.
- Mapping EDL criteria with EA criteria suggested.
- EDL criteria should be concise to manage expectations.
- Integration with existing academic systems to minimize administrative burden.
- Recognition of alternative pathways for internationalization beyond joint degree delivery.

## Impact and perception

- EDL should not stop at issuing a label but move towards genuine European diplomas.

- Avoid adding complexity to the setup of joint degrees.
- Support for labelling short, internationalized learning experiences within existing degrees for broader impact.

### Awarding institution

- Proposal for EU agency or EQAR accreditation bodies to award EDL.
- Self-awarding of EDL by institutions is deemed unacceptable.
- Institutions can use criteria for self-evaluation but not self-award EDL.
- Similar process to European Approach (EA) accreditation.
- EQAR-registered agencies suggested awarding EDL.
- European degree label awarded by institutions themselves, respecting their responsibility and quality assurance systems.
- Proposal for automatic recognition within existing national qualification frameworks.
- Opposition to creating a new European accreditation agency.
- Preference for accreditation by national/European agencies for EDL eligibility.

### Added value

- **Relevance of European Degree Label (EDL) and Financial Incentives:**
  - EDL is beneficial for ERASMUS MUNDUS programs when European Approach (EA) accreditation is not feasible.
  - Proposal for financial incentives to institutions aligning with EDL, promoting internationalization and career opportunities.
- **Global labour market and attractiveness:**
  - EDL aims to meet global labour market needs, enhancing attractiveness of European study programs.
  - Expected increase in students with European/international exposure, not just flagship degrees of alliances.

### Other suggestions

- **European Approach and recognition of foreign degrees:** Clarification needed on how EDL will impact recognition of foreign degrees.
- **Business plans and funding:**
  - Need for diverse funding sources beyond Erasmus Mundus Joint Master program.
  - Consideration of tuition fee policies across different countries.
- **Streamlining processes and training:**
  - Importance of describing processes for developing joint study programs.
  - Training required for key staff beyond international relations officers, including curriculum development, registrar offices, and academic affairs.

To sum up, the SMARTT project was divided into two primary phases. The first phase focuses on the Erasmus Mundus Master "EUROSUD." This phase is pivotal for pre-testing the EDL criteria, involving comprehensive stakeholder engagement and methodical analysis to assess the alignment of the EUROSUD program with the EDL criteria and to identify areas for improvement. The second phase extends the methodology to over 50 programs within the CIVIS Alliance and partner networks, aiming to validate the EDL criteria on a larger scale.

A key innovation of the SMARTT project is its iterative process, which ensures flexibility and thoroughness by building upon each previous step and integrating insights and feedback from a broad range of stakeholders. This approach facilitates the comprehensive engagement of stakeholders such as students, alumni, faculty, staff, management teams, experts, and external stakeholders, ensuring that the recommendations consider multiple perspectives and enhance the robustness and inclusivity of the EDL criteria.

Another distinctive feature is the thematic clustering of EDL criteria, aimed at providing a clearer and more focused overview to enhance understanding and application. This novel approach to structuring the criteria underscores the project's effort to make the EDL criteria more actionable and meaningful.

The findings from both phases of the project reveal key insights and recommendations for the deployment of the EDL. The EUROSUD case study highlighted the program's alignment with the EDL criteria and pinpointed areas requiring enhancements, facilitating the creation of specific indicators for broader application. The second phase employed the SMARTT Selection Questionnaire, the SMARTT Survey and on focus-groups and interviews. Programs generally aligned well with criteria related to student support services, but gaps were identified in areas such as joint curriculum development and internationalization strategies. Engaging extensively with stakeholders provided invaluable insights into the practical implementation of the EDL, underscoring the importance of enhancing the virtual mobility component, strengthening connections to the labour market, and addressing identified gaps in the EDL criteria. Stakeholders expressed positive perceptions of the EDL but highlighted the need for additional resources and support for successful implementation. Feedback from experts and students emphasized concerns over the complexity of the EDL criteria and the need for practical benefits and hands-on experiences within programs. The EDL is viewed to enhance international career opportunities, promote multilingualism, and increase the attractiveness and marketability of programs.

In conclusion, the SMARTT Approach offers a comprehensive framework of analysis for the successful implementation of the European Degree Label, emphasizing the need for clarity in criteria, stakeholder engagement, and the incorporation of practical benefits for students. By addressing the feedback and recommendations from a diverse range of participants, the project contributes significantly to the enhancement of the quality, competitiveness, and attractiveness of European higher education programs, paving the way for a more integrated and inclusive educational landscape across Europe.



2

# THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN DEGREES

Final SMARTT Recommendations

## About the SMARTT Recommendations

The final recommendations underscore the collective effort, incorporating outcomes from the working sessions of both the Core and Enlarged Experts Groups, the mapping of programs across CIVIS and its partner alliances (UNITA, NeurotechEU, EUTOPIA) through the selection questionnaire, insights from the SMARTT survey, and the valuable perspectives obtained from focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders, including Ministries and Quality Assurance Agencies, and students - the primary beneficiaries.

In the following sections of this recommendations set, it will be addressed the need for:

- **Delineating the added value** of the degree for its successful implementation, which includes defining the European Degree Label (EDL)'s purpose and distinctiveness, examining financial models and incentives, and advocating for the integration with existing systems and certifications to avoid disruptions.
- **Clarifying** the Joint European Degree concept, and its alignment with joint programs and degrees. If the ambition of a European Degree is to establish an academically strong qualification recognized Europe-wide, embracing a verified body of competencies it should be clarified the various formats like multiple degrees, joint degrees, or their combinations, that can apply to the criteria established by the European Commission.
- **Setting clear criteria**, as revealed through an in-depth analysis of 20 criteria (both compulsory and optional), highlighting the need for precise definitions and a clarified conceptual framework - as SMARTT provided - to comprehend the European Degree and its interconnection with other educational tools and processes. This encompasses considerations like learning outcome transparency, virtual mobility enhancement, and labour market connection improvement, proposing the addition of new criteria to cater to the diverse requirements and contexts of joint educational programs.
- The integration of the EDL with **quality assurance frameworks** to uphold high academic standards and promote a transnational, inclusive, and transformative educational atmosphere. It's essential for the EDL, as a hallmark of excellence or a distinctive certification for cross-border educational initiatives resulting in joint degrees, to be recognized and endorsed by member states and Quality Assurance Agencies. Developing a comprehensive conceptual framework is imperative to delineate the impact of such degrees on the qualification system, career prospects, quality assurance protocols, and the broader educational environment.
- The advocacy for utilizing existing **Bologna tools and processes** to refine and bolster the design and execution of joint educational programs, necessitating a thorough review of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) and the European Approach (EA), fostering trust and transparency in quality assurance systems.
- **The identification of challenges** encountered during the pilot phase, with proposed solutions focusing on curriculum development, quality assurance, accreditation, recognition and transferability, administration, governance, resource allocation, and the accommodation of cultural nuances.

In summary, these recommendations offer a detailed array of policy guidelines to aid in the development, recognition, and quality assurance of joint degree programs within the European Higher

Education Area, advocating for alignment with existing policies, the creation of specific quality assurance and accreditation standards, the advancement of digital integration, the provision of financial support and incentives, and the encouragement of enhanced mobility and cooperation.

Overall, SMARTT contributes to a deeper understanding of stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes towards program quality and adherence to European standards, providing a foundation for continuous improvement and alignment with the EDL within the CIVIS alliance.

## Context

In recent years, the landscape of European higher education has significantly evolved, aiming to improve the interoperability of educational systems across the continent and beyond. At the heart of this evolution is the Bologna Process, a key series of reforms and initiatives that culminated in the formation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA stands out for enabling the recognition of academic qualifications across member states, enhancing the mobility of students and scholars. It reflects a unified commitment among European countries to develop a harmonized approach to higher education—a strategy designed to fortify community bonds, mitigate inequalities, and stimulate economic and cultural partnerships. Grounded in a collective dedication to internationalization, the EHEA encompasses both the social aspects and the pedagogical dynamics of education.

Furthermore, the establishment of the European Education Area (EEA) serves to broaden and deepen the core objectives initiated by the EHEA, dedicated to making education without borders, a reality. This initiative reaches beyond the confines of higher education, embracing the entire educational spectrum from early childhood learning to adult education. The EEA aims to cultivate a European sense of identity through educational practices, while also advocating for linguistic variety and digital literacy. In striving to elevate the inclusiveness and calibre of educational frameworks throughout Europe, the EEA supports individuals in gaining the essential skills for societal engagement and employability. This comprehensive strategy not only highlights the significance of academic distinction and mobility but also underscores the value of lifelong learning, equality, and educational innovation. By orchestrating these concerted efforts, the EEA plays a vital role in fostering a more interconnected, competitive, and united Europe.

Amidst these transformations, the European Degree Label (EDL) has surfaced as a key initiative, described as a 'European policy experimentation in higher education' by the European Commission in 2022. The EDL proposes a seal of quality for joint degree programs, symbolizing a commitment to excellence in transnational education and enhancing the visibility and attractiveness of European higher education globally, building further on the success of the Bologna Process and on the growing potential of the EHEA.

The European Commission's 2023 Report, 'The road towards a possible joint European Degree: identifying opportunities and investigating the impact and feasibility of different approaches' served as the start and end reference points of this SMARTT Report, as it explores different scenarios for implementing a possible Joint European Degree. **Challenges in transnational higher education, such as restrictive national legislation and inconsistencies in quality assurance, appear to underscore the need for such an initiative.** The European Commission examined the opportunities, impacts, and feasibility of various approaches towards this potential goal. The different scenarios presented in the Report, particularly the European Degree Label, led to the selection of six pilot-projects, funded by the

European Commission through the Erasmus+ Programme, aiming to analyze the EDL and provide recommendations on its development and implementation.

The European Commission's 2023 Report proposed two main options:

- **Joint European Degree Label:** A label awarded to joint study programmes meeting predefined criteria, enhancing the programmes' visibility and recognition.
- **Joint European Degree as a Qualification:** A more integrated approach, accrediting joint programmes based on common European criteria, potentially leading to the issuance of joint degrees.

A step-by-step approach, starting with the Joint European Degree Label and progressing towards a comprehensive joint degree system based on common European criteria, was the main recommendation of the European Commission. This phased approach was justified by its potential to allow for iterative learning, stakeholder engagement, and legislative adaptations to ensure the successful realization of a Joint European Degree.

## SMARTT Recommendations

The SMARTT approach involved **a two-step iterative process**, first *employing a small-scale case-study*, pre-testing its methodology on EUROSUD and then *expanding the methodological framework to the level of the CIVIS Alliance and its partners*, as previously described in this Report.

Overall, the outcomes and conclusions of this process and of the SMARTT Project partly reflect the initial proposals of the European Commission, particularly in relation to a phased approach towards a more integrated transnational cooperation in higher education. Therefore, the SMARTT Project recommends **a three-stage approach**, which can be implemented successively, each stage building on the previous, or which can develop independently, based on the results of the monitoring and evaluation of each stage.

The three stages reflect the process of building on the European Degree Label and the transition towards a Joint European Degree: **Emerging, Converging and Merging**. These stages will be further addressed below.



### SMARTT Recommendations: Approach

First, we will refer to some general comments and recommendations based on the analysis of the SMARTT Survey, which offers some insights as to how **the first stage – Emerge** – could be addressed to increase the chances for positive outcomes in the EDL deployment. The methodological approach is described in detail in the corresponding section of this report.

Our analysis indicates **a general positive perception of the EDL**: there is a clear trend indicating that program coordinators (in CIVIS and partner alliances) view the EDL positively. They believe it is

beneficial and that alignment with the EDL criteria could **enhance the programmes' reputation and value**. There is also **a strong belief in the EDL's relevance and applicability**: respondents generally agree that the EDL criteria are relevant, flexible, and adaptable to future changes in the educational landscape, which suggests confidence in the EDL's durability and relevance over time. Overall, there appears to be **consensus on the EDL's strategic importance**: most respondents see the alignment with the EDL as a strategic priority and believe that it fits well with long-term educational goals and provides a competitive advantage.

However, there are **notable levels of neutrality and some disagreement** concerning *the measurability of the EDL criteria, their alignment with program outcomes, and the clarity of guidance provided by the EDL*. This points to uncertainties and potential concerns about the implementation process and the evaluation of compliance with the EDL criteria. While most respondents agree that the EDL criteria align with broader institutional and external goals and values, there is still an increased proportion of neutral responses that reflect ambivalence or lack of clarity about how these alignments manifest.

The analysis also suggests that *while attitudes toward aligning with the EDL are generally positive and intentions are strong, subjective norms are mixed, and perceived behavioural control varies, which could affect the translation of intentions into actual alignment with the EDL*. To increase the likelihood of alignment, it may be needed to address the areas of perceived insufficiency in resources and guidance, reinforce the positive attitudes, and work towards a stronger consensus within the programme team and the wider educational community, including programmes of partner alliances or institutions. Therefore, to address the EDL deployment at the institutional level, we would recommend for the leadership and programme coordinators to:

### **Enhance dissemination and clarity**

#### **Develop comprehensive guidelines:**

- Address the observed neutrality and uncertainty towards the EDL among respondents (academic and administrative staff) by providing more information about the EDL's goals, benefits, and the practicalities of its criteria. This could involve workshops, FAQs, or detailed guidance documents.

#### **Promote success stories:**

- Highlight successful case studies or scenarios where EDL alignment could (or has) positively impact(ed) similar programmes, to illustrate tangible benefits and encourage broader support and adoption.
- Streamline EDL labelling processes using best practices from successful programs.
- Share best-practice examples of different labels issued for joint programmes across Europe.

#### **Explore a gradual deployment of the EDL**

- Consider a pilot phase for deployment, first introducing EDL to a small group of institutions. This will help identify any potential challenges or areas of improvement before a full-scale launch.

### **Strengthen support and resources**

### **Provide targeted support:**

- Identify and address perceived barriers to EDL implementation, by providing targeted support, resources, and guidance for different programme areas.

### **Improve accessibility to resources:**

- Ensure adequate availability and accessibility of resources and guidance for institutions in line with recommendations on alignment with EDL criteria.

### **Foster stakeholder engagement and buy-in**

#### **Engage with stakeholders:**

- To understand their expectations and to ensure the EDL criteria reflect the diversity of stakeholder needs, including students, faculty, and employers.

#### **Internal advocacy:**

- Recognize and reward efforts within HEIs to align with the EDL, creating internal champions within the program who can influence their peers and support the alignment process through advocacy and example.

### **Establish clear metrics and benchmarks**

#### **Ensure measurable criteria:**

- Formulate clear, specific metrics and benchmarks for measuring compliance with the EDL criteria and the programme's progress towards alignment, helping to reduce uncertainty and enhance transparency.

### **Prioritize flexibility and relevance**

#### **Ensure criteria flexibility:**

- Acknowledge and plan for the evolving landscape of higher education ensuring that the EDL criteria are flexible and adaptable to future changes in educational technology, societal needs, and international standards.

#### **Align with broader goals:**

- Reinforce the alignment of the EDL criteria with broader educational and institutional goals, emphasizing EDL's role in supporting a common vision.

Throughout the project and based on our analysis, there appears to be a rather high level of uncertainty or a lack of information in relation to the EDL, which could be an area to address through more detailed communication about how the EDL criteria might be integrated and beneficial to the programmes' unique contexts. While there are positive perceptions of the EDL, we recommend a streamlined approach to **communicating clear and consistent messages about the EDL across all stakeholders**, to build consensus around its adoption. Considering the transition towards the development and implementation of the JED, we recommend **including a clear roadmap and scenarios** that would allow stakeholders to better plan and manage their expectation in relation to the complexity of the process, as well as to the challenges and opportunities they will experience.

## SMARTT Recommendations: Process

As previously mentioned, the SMARTT recommendations will also focus on three different stages of developing and implementing the European Degree Label, aiming to facilitate the transition towards the Joint European Degree. The following section presents in detail these stages, along with specific recommendations on the content, structure, and process of EDL implementation, as well as different prerequisites at European, national, and institutional levels that would allow a phased approach towards the Joint European Degree.

### Emerging: Implementation of the EDL

This stage addresses the development and deployment of the European Degree Label, and it focuses solely on the mechanisms related to this process.

#### Definition and differentiation

Firstly, we recommend **a clearer differentiation of the following types of programmes and degrees**, ensuring a common definition and understanding across all Member States. The national legislation should be adapted to reflect the commonly agreed upon definitions.

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes defines a ‘joint programme’ as «an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from EHEA countries and leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree» (EQAR). This is the most official definition of a joint programme, although clearly a joint programme can be offered by institutions from different countries, whether (some of) these institutions are located within or outside of the EHEA. The “double” or “multiple degrees” - instead – are defined like «separate degrees awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme attesting the successful completion of this programme (if two degrees are awarded by two institutions, this is a “double degree”) » (idem).

Lastly, a “dual degree” is not awarded by a joint programme, as it 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. 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 (ECA).

The two main differences between a dual degree and a double degree are the following:

- *A dual degree is not awarded by a joint programme*, and
- In many cases, *issuing a dual degree does not require a joint international admission procedure developed by the partner institutions*; instead, students are chosen among the students that have already been admitted to the home institutions.

Moreover, as there are situations where, for example, three partners design and implement a joint programme and one partner issues a separate parchment due to national legislation, whereas two partners issue a common parchment (i.e. joint degree), the EDL should remain flexible enough as to address these mixed degrees. Given the mapping of programmes within the CIVIS Alliance and its partners, reflecting the EDL criteria are validated against all Erasmus Mundus programmes, as well as

some of the multiple degree and very few of the double degree programmes, SMARTT proposes that, at this initial stage, the European Degree Label could be defined as follows:

The European Degree Label (EDL) represents a quality seal to recognize and endorse joint programmes that reflect excellence in transnational education, based on criteria aligned to European standards, emphasizing the commitment to educational excellence, mobility, inclusivity, and the internationalization of higher education. At this initial stage, we would recommend addressing the definition to joint programmes, rather than to joint degrees, to recognize the different interpretation and national legislation provisions, which in some cases leads to different certifications being issued by each partner institution. In other words, we recommend for the focus to remain at programme level, while the certification arrangements can differ.

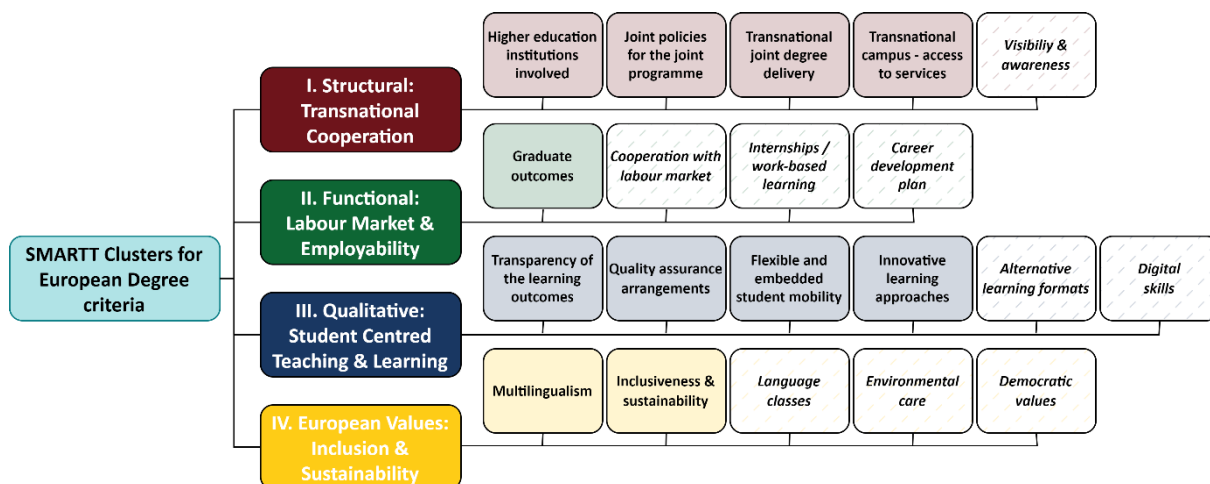
One specific recommendation streams from reservations regarding the EDL, despite its recognized value, namely better defining the EDL’s positioning and value proposition differentiating it from existing initiatives, while ensuring it does not double efforts, particularly considering the complexities of the accreditation and quality assurance contexts. This adds on to the general recommendation for transparency and clear communication of the challenges and opportunities of the EDL, as well as its end-goal, to all relevant stakeholders.

### Clusters, criteria, and indicators

The second recommendation would be in relation to the EDL criteria. Firstly, we recommend organizing the EDL criteria into corresponding thematic clusters, to ensure more structure, logic and to provide a clearer and more focused overview of the areas that need to be addressed for programs interested in obtaining the EDL, enhancing effectiveness in both understanding and application of the EDL.

Therefore, the proposal is reflected in the following structure:

- I. **Structural:** Transnational Cooperation
- II. **Functional:** Labour Market & Employability
- III. **Qualitative:** Student Centred Teaching & Learning
- IV. **European Values:** Inclusion & Sustainability



*The EDL criteria were assigned to a specific cluster, based on an overlapping theme. The mandatory criteria are reflected in the cluster’s corresponding color, while the optional criteria are represented through the white-background boxes.*



A fifth cluster could be added to these, **V. Administrative and Organizational Effectiveness**, ensuring that minimum standards of collaboration among partner institutions are in place.

The relevance of clustering the criteria is also supported by the analysis of the CIVIS and partners' joint programmes, which revealed *the existence of an internal relationship/correlation between the clusters* (as defined above): programmes that comply with the criteria of the first cluster reflect compliance with the criteria of cluster II (0.46) and cluster III (0.5). On the other hand, programmes that comply with the criteria of the second cluster are also compliant with the criteria of III (0.4) and IV (0.27) (for a detailed overview on the data, please consult [SMARTT Deliverable 13](#)).

In terms of the **criteria**, there are several recommendations based on our consultations:

- *Ensure tools and mechanisms for measuring compliance* (which can also be addressed through including pre-defined indicators).
- *Validate the EDL criteria by National or Regional Quality Assurance Agencies* before deployment.
- *Avoid increasing the number of criteria* (preference for reduction).
- *Better integrate the EDL criteria and the European Approach* to make them both more accessible (reducing complexity and the financial burden).
- *Foster the internationalization of the learning experiences* across universities and countries.
- Increase focus on the *student-centred teaching criteria*.
- Provide *extra guidelines addressing the awarding of the EDL solely based on existence of criteria* (i.e. check-list approach), or whether the award should also take into account the results or specific quality standards (for example, in the case of graduate outcomes, is the criterion met if the programme employs a graduate tracking system, or should there be evidence of a minimum employment rate among graduates?)
- *Enhance the European identity and values component* underlying the EDL. Some recommendations refer to including these as a mandatory criterion or add them to the Democratic values criterion (to be made mandatory) - as this component represents the core foundation of the EDL (i.e. particular interest from students, including *suggestions to incorporate micro-credentials on democratic values and European legislation*).
- Focus on *alignment with criteria related to integrated curriculum, joint policies and joint visibility and awareness activities with stakeholders*, which appear to be the least covered in existing joint programmes (as per our analysis). This could also inform some of the support measures and instruments that could be employed to help programmes better respond to the EDL criteria, particularly in shifting the focus from structural and quantitative aspects, towards content and specific processes. Also, one recommendation could be to draw the attention of partner institutions from a joint programme design focused on pre-admission, to the design focused on implementation and delivery.
- Focus on *alignment with criteria in Cluster III: Qualitative – Student-Centred Teaching and Learning*, which recorded the lowest level of alignment between analysed programmes and the EDL, with notable mentions related to the Joint Diploma Supplement, additional formats of transnational learning activities with partner institutions and assessment of student (digital) skills, leading to a similar recommendation related to support, expertise and tools to support institutions and programmes to better align to these criteria.

- Focus on *alignment with criteria in Cluster IV: European Values – Inclusion & Sustainability, particularly in the case of components and actions related to environmental sustainability, minimizing the environmental footprint, and volunteering opportunities* (with or without associated ECTS). As it is the case for the other clusters, the EDL criteria could also represent a guideline for developing the joint programmes, helping programmes improve their quality and students' academic experience.
- *Differentiate between criteria which are specifically related to different cycles* – namely Bachelor, Masters, and Doctorate – potentially by *marking the relevant criteria as optional*, except for the targeted cycle.
- Clarify/define **transnational** in the context of Transnational joint degree delivery *to avoid confusion between teaching and students' multiple mobility*. For the particular purpose of the phased approach to implementing a more flexible approach to the EDL and building towards the Joint European Degree, the criterion should be rephrased as transnational joint programme delivery.
- A particular recommendation would be to *allow and support HEIs from outside the EU/EHEA as partners in the joint programmes, while adhering to the criterion of a minimum two EU member states involved in the joint programme* (with a potential provision that the coordinator of the joint programme is from one of the EU/EHEA member states).
- Clarification regarding the Transparency of Learning Outcomes criterion with regards to the Intended Learning Outcomes and where those are visible to applicants and employers.
- In what concerns the **Transnational Campus** criterion, *explore the potential for the students to be registered at all degree-awarding partner institutions for the full duration of the degree* (provided there are procedures in place to avoid duplicate tuition fees).
- The multilingualism criterion *could be refined, as to avoid exclusion of institutions from two different member states which share a common language*. Other exceptions arise if, for example, the official language is English and the teaching language is also English, as the chosen lingua franca. This criterion could be adapted to reflect students' exposure to at least two different EU official languages either through the official language of the partner institutions, through interaction with their international peers, or through an exception for this criterion to be fulfilled via language classes if the partner countries official language is common (e.g. Germany - Austria, Belgium - France etc.).
- *Enhance the virtual mobility component* within the EDL (including a virtual campus, under the transnational campus criterion).
- *Clarify the approach to the criterion related to embedded student mobility arrangements* and whether the 6-month mobility can be composed of several mobility semesters and/or summer/winter schools, etc.
- *Enhance the labour market connection*, with regards to the work placement and internship components. In connection to this specific criterion, a recommendation could be made towards more flexibility in terms of recognition via ECTS, as some programmes offer placements which are not credit bearing, even though they contribute significantly to a valuable experience. Also, increase visibility and awareness in relation to EUROGRADUATE or provide specific guidelines in relation to this criterion.
- *Enhance the visibility and awareness criterion* (from optional to mandatory)

- Explore the addition of a new criterion relating to **institutional development of the academia and research components** through the joint degrees (potential integration with the European Research Area).
- Explore the potential to include an **employment criterion** (1 year after graduation) for programs with at least one graduate cohort.
- Provide further clarification on the tailored measures for *all categories of disadvantaged students* (students with special educational needs), particularly if these refer to practical measures such as ‘fee waivers’ for students who are unable to pay tuition fees (important to clarify to help programme coordinators better understand whether the criterion is fulfilled without these specific provisions).
- *Explore the potential to include an optional criterion regarding distribution of tasks and responsibility among partners* (e.g., Set of committees and rotating Chairs, change of coordinators with each funding period, etc.). This could be part of a new, separate criterion, under the **Structural cluster**, that would reflect indicators **on administrative and organizational effectiveness**, ensuring that minimum standards of collaboration among partner institutions are in place.
  - A potential definition for the ‘Administrative and Organizational 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.’
  - The indicators could include administrative infrastructure, training and development, documentation, stakeholder communication, feedback mechanisms, periodic internal reviews, collaboration framework, resource allocation, crisis management, transparency.
- Explore the potential *to include an optional criterion regarding the quality of both educational provisions as well as of processes* (e.g., External International Advisory Board).

While having criteria is essential, specific **indicators** have the potential to make them more actionable, and measurable. Indicators serve as the bridge between more abstract principles and tangible outcomes, ensuring that the European Degree Label criteria are effectively implemented and assessed. Therefore, based on the definitions of individual criteria, we propose **the inclusion of a set of specific indicators** to help better define the EDL. The full set of indicators can be consulted in the SMARTT Project deliverables section.

## Awarding the EDL

### ***Certification level***

We recommend *a specific differentiation between Bachelor, Master, and PhD programmes through compulsory/optional criteria that reflect the specific certifications and qualifications for each level*. Moreover, we recommend the inclusion of micro-programmes, blended intensive programmes and other innovative initiatives developed within alliances and university consortia, which match the EDL criteria but do not necessarily fit the definition of the joint degree.

## **Awarding body**

Even though our analysis reflected stakeholders' preference for a 'trusted awarding body', we see this as an opportunity to support institutional autonomy and the transformation of the evaluation culture within higher education institutions. **Therefore, we recommend the EDL to be awarded to the joint programme, based on an internal evaluation carried out by the programme coordinator in collaboration with institutional partners, following an EDL accreditation process.** The internal evaluation process should be carried out based on the European Standards and Guidelines (comprehensive framework for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area). The EDL accreditation process can be initiated, on a voluntary basis, by any European higher education institution, as coordinator of a joint programme.

*We recommend the inclusion of an accreditation process given the need of stakeholders for clear criteria and a recognized authority to ensure compliance,* particularly as the need for robust quality assurance arrangements was seen as critical.

While there might be no European authority to award the EDL, *there should be a European coordinating body for the EDL to oversee the process and authorize the EQAR-registered agencies for the EDL accreditation.* The accreditation process can be carried out at national level, through any EQAR-registered agency authorized by the European coordinating body for the European Degree Label. Higher education institutions can apply, on a voluntary basis, for EDL accreditation through the regular institutional re/accreditation/evaluation process, thus avoiding an extra layer of complexity and bureaucracy. Where the European Approach is not available and where EQAR-registered agencies are not available, specific provisions can be temporarily employed.

*The EDL accreditation would be based on an institutional self-evaluation of the joint programme(s) the institution intends to award the EDL.* Once the EDL accreditation is granted, the higher education institution, as a joint programme coordinator, can award the EDL label to the joint programme(s) meeting the EDL criteria and issue the EDL certificate to its graduates, in agreement with its partners. In this first stage, the EDL accreditation is granted to the institution (not to the programme), which is then responsible for the internal evaluation of the joint programmes it coordinates. As one step in this process, the ESGs should be revised to ensure they reflect the particularities of the European Degree Label.

Once the institution receives its EDL accreditation, for the duration of the regular accreditation/evaluation process, *it can award the EDL to newly initiated joint programmes it coordinates, based on the internal evaluation process.*

The internal evaluation option is supported by our analysis, as the majority appears confident in their ability to meet the EDL requirements for the existing joint programmes, considering the implementation to be manageable, while also expressing a sense of motivation and commitment towards the EDL goal.

## **Awarding process and certification**

For the process to be carried out effectively, there are several instruments to be put in place beforehand. We also recommend for a detailed step-by-step procedure for the EDL (from the EDL accreditation process to internal evaluation and certification) as well as templates to be provided at the European level, by the European coordinating body for the EDL, which partner institutions can adapt depending on their specific needs and national/regional requirements:

- An EDL certificate template (including learning outcomes based on the EDL criteria)
- A consortium agreement template for joint programmes, to reflect the EDL certificate provisions.
- A template form for the EDL accreditation process through an EQAR-registered and EDL authorized agency.

At this initial stage, *the certificate would be issued at the program level by the programme coordinator, as a separate document from the multiple/joint degree certification issued in conformity with national/regional legislation.* The EDL certificate would be a digital certificate, including digital signatures from all partner institutions, with the option to be saved and printed (i.e. .pdf format). The EDL certificate will include information on the partner institutions and their specific identifiers, information on the joint programme and a minimum agreed list of learning outcomes based on the EDL criteria. The EDL Certificate will be added to the Diploma Supplement.

Where/if possible, we recommend that *EDL requirements and processes integrate as seamlessly as possible with existing systems and infrastructures, as well as with other academic certifications, quality assurance systems or labels to minimize disruption and reduce redundancy.* For example, this could entail a stronger integration of the EDL with the European Approach, where possible, so that joint programmes adhering to the European Approach standards in the mandatory accreditation process could be automatically awarded the EDL.

For joint programmes not following the European Approach in the accreditation process, *the EDL internal evaluation could be carried out (during this initial stage) on a platform such as Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure, on a specifically developed EDL module, that would help avoid redundancies between the EDL certificate and the Diploma Supplement.* The platform can be used by the programme coordinator to validate the programme against the EDL criteria based on the specific indicators. The scoring system could be adapted and developed from the one pre-tested through the SMARTT Project Selection Questionnaire. The use of such an online platform would allow for transparency, ensuring a common procedure and providing information on the number of EDL programmes and their alignment to the criteria. The institution would be included on the EQAR list of EDL accredited institutions, while following the internal evaluation and online process on the EDCI, the specific joint programmes awarded the EDL would also be updated in the EQAR database (automatically, if platform integration allows it).

Our project captured a strong sentiment for **the need for clarity in differentiating levels of achievement regarding the EDL criteria, and the majority's belief there should be distinct tiers of attainment.** These underscore a desire for a well-defined framework that distinguishes varying degrees of compliance or excellence. The SMARTT recommendation is *to clarify whether the EDL is based on an all-or-nothing approach, or whether it could be awarded based on different levels/percentage of alignment.* The EDL evaluation and certificate could reflect 3 different levels of alignment to the EDL criteria. For example, the three levels could be defined as: Leading (100 - 75%), Advancing (74% - 50%) and Emerging (49% - 25%). When a program moves from one level to another by validating extra criteria, the program coordinator can re-submit the request form to register their joint programme for the next level (the corresponding certification would only be issued for the students' cohort enrolled after the new level was achieved).

One SMARTT recommendation refers to *the clarification of how often/if the EDL should be renewed and how, particularly if differentiated based on degree of alignment.* The renewal of the EDL accreditation could be done during the regular/mandatory re-accreditation/evaluation process, or on

a case-by-case basis, as the joint programme changes its structure (for example, qualifying for the next level as defined above).

At the institutional level, *training and workshops should be provided for academic and administrative staff to gain more understanding of the process*. If resources allow it, it would be recommended that an online platform be developed by each higher education institution, specifically dedicated to the implementation of joint programmes (based on a common structure and functionalities, which could later be developed to reflect specific institutional, and partnership needs and requirements).

## Incentives

We recommend that *particular attention be given to the resources required for implementation, from providing adequate guidance and support in the process, to ensuring more familiarity with the EDL* (both in terms of challenges and opportunities) and lastly, to ensuring human and financial resources. At this stage, efforts towards EDL accreditation, internal evaluation and certification could be split between institutional/national funding and European funding through programmes such as Erasmus+, allowing for an extended piloting stage of the EDL. *A new financial model could also be explored to specifically support joint programmes under the EDL*. Also, financial incentives (grants) could be offered to institutions which may require significant resources to align to the EDL criteria.

**The EDL could be obtained by joint programmes initiated and developed by higher education institutions part of University Alliances, but this is not a prerequisite, as the EDL would be available to all European universities. Alternatively, if the programme is implemented by institutions which are part of an Alliance with legal entity status, the EDL certificate could be issued by the Alliance, following the EDL accreditation process.**

As an extra incentive, institutions whose joint programme(s) currently meet **more than 75% of the EDL criteria** could be **fast-tracked towards EDL accreditation**. Then, following an internal evaluation, the joint programme would be awarded the EDL, and the upcoming cohort of graduates would be issued with the EDL certification.

One note: while incentivising programmes towards the EDL, there should also be **a balanced approach towards `conventional` programmes**, building on their particular merits and offering alternative options and routes for development.

## Process

Whereas this first stage places the focus on institutional processes aimed at re/designing joint programmes in alignment with the EDL criteria, there are also several recommendations for the European coordinating body:

- *An EU-wide committee/body could be established to ensure the alignment with EDL criteria*, to develop guidelines for consistent learning outcomes, to organize workshops and seminars to align EDL (self) assessment/validation methods, and to ensure curriculum relevance through continuous feedback surveys at European level.
- *Guidelines could be developed for consistent learning outcomes for EDL*, while allowing for flexibility.
- *Aim for balance between European integration and national educational identities through a modular curriculum approach*, as part of the EDL.

- 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.
- EDL process needs to *be streamlined based on successful programmes implemented so far*, while regular audits and evaluations would be needed to ensure parity with traditional methods, aiming to develop a possible qualifications framework for the European Degrees.
- *Structural barriers need to be addressed through dialogue and support for legislative reforms at national and European level*, aiming to streamline professional skill validation processes and to enhance the reputation of the European Degrees.
- *Integrate the EDL with existing policies and frameworks*, where possible, to enhance compatibility and facilitate implementation.
- *A common governance framework for EDL could be developed*, reducing bureaucratic obstacles through e-governance and digital platforms, harmonizing academic calendars (particularly where institutional autonomy at national level allows for more flexibility), and enhancing stakeholder communication through collaborative platforms.
- *Joint research and education funding* (such as Erasmus+ and Horizon) are needed to further support the establishment of a European Degree, encouraging cooperation among academics at transnational level and enhancing global marketing campaigns to attract international students.
- *Provide financial support for modernization* where needed to reduce gaps between different HEIs aiming to align to the EDL criteria.

## Converging: EDL development and Joint European Degree framework

Based on the conceptual framework developed in the first stage, a clear definition of the Joint European Degree (JED) should also be included and its adoption at national levels should be encouraged. In this case, *the JED refers to a common certification issued by all the partner institutions, 'understood as a widely available joint degree based on common European criteria'* (European Commission, 2023).

Once the Joint European Degree framework is fully implemented, the stand-alone EDL award would be aimed solely to programmes which meet the EDL criteria but do not wish to pursue the Joint European Degree route due to national/institutional challenges or other factors. However, all the EDL accredited institutions should reach the Converging stage according to a mutually agreed timeline, thus ensuring better alignment of the EDL with its initial scope to reflect quality and excellence in joint programmes across Europe and beyond.

While the EDL certification is implemented and developing, further steps can be taken to better define and deploy the Joint European Degree, building on the EDL. *The Joint European Degree is granted by joint degree programmes, following a voluntary process, which could be based on several prerequisites.*

## Prerequisites

### ***At European level***

- *The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* are revised at the European level in accordance with the specificities of the EDL and the JED.
- *The European Qualifications Framework* is revised in accordance with the specificities of the EDL and the JED (specific qualification levels could have a distinctive mark to better correlate them to the European Degree – for example, 6E for Bachelor, 7E for master’s etc.).
- *The Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area* is linked with the revised European Qualifications Framework.
- *The European Diploma Supplement template* is created in accordance with the specificities of the EDL and the JED; automated/simultaneous editing of many documents should be facilitated through a dedicated system.
- *The Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region* is revisited across the European Union to support and facilitate automatic recognition of JEDs.
- *International agreements and collaborations* are consolidated to ensure that the EDL and the JED are recognized and valued outside of the European Union, enhancing the global mobility of graduates.
- In addition to employing the ECTS system in support of the EDL, explore the possibility to provide *a grading equivalence system or set of guidelines that allows for the comparison and translation of grades from one country’s higher education system to another within Europe (and internationally)*. The guidelines could comprise the different grading systems (independent of the field of study, or educational cycle), the numeric indicators, as well as general descriptors and/or performance indicators, allowing for different national systems to have a common understanding of what the grade represents, being mindful of the different traditional and cultural implications.

### ***At national level***

- Where possible, *the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes* is employed.
- For each partner institution, *national legislation is adapted*, where necessary, to facilitate the awarding of a Joint European Degree, also ensuring National Qualifications Framework alignment with the EQF.
- *The national legislation* for all the partner institutions within a JED programme allows for flexibility regarding the use of JED certification templates, allowing for the inclusion of all partners, as well as the EDL mark.

### ***At institutional level***

- Measures are in place for *the transition towards a Joint European Degree* (consortium agreements, certification, EDL accreditation, reviewed European Diploma Supplement, etc.)



- If institutions are interested in further pursuing joint degrees, in the process of EDL accreditation *the EQAR-registered agencies would also assess additional joint European Degree label criteria* (to national accreditation criteria). Where such agencies are not available, specific provisions will be temporarily employed.
- Internal and consortium procedures for *admission and enrolment of students* are clear and in line with the EDL and the JED.
- Explore *separate admission procedures/routes/calendars for the joint programmes* (separate from the regular programmes provided by each HEI) in accordance with partners' approach, where institutional autonomy and processes allow for increased flexibility.
- Explore providing *guidelines/mitigation scenarios for addressing different tuition fee policies* among partner institutions/national higher education systems.
- *Digital technologies* are leveraged to support the EDL and the potential JED programme implementation.

This second stage entails significant resources, and it is possible that different countries and institutions implement these prerequisites at a different pace, depending on their institutional, regional, or national contexts. However, **while this process is ongoing and the first JEDs are developing, the EDL certification would continue to be awarded to EDL accredited institutions.**

## Incentives

Given the commitment required at all levels – European, national, institutional, and individual – for the development and implementation of JEDs, we recommend **a specific line of European financing addressed to this type of programme.** It is also important to ensure financial sustainability, thus partner institutions are encouraged to look for alternative funding at national level and/or from employers/other stakeholders. *Partial European funding could be granted for a renewal if a minimum co-funding option is secured in due time* (for example, European funding could match the consortium funding up to the required budget). Continuous funding for European degrees could also be ensured, where possible, through public-private partnerships.

One recommendation going forward refers to **a revision of the European Approach to make it more accessible and efficient to further facilitate its adoption.**

JEDs could be initiated and developed by any European higher education institutions which meet the criteria, with no prerequisites regarding institutional membership to a European University Alliance.

**Innovative joint programmes (micro-programmes, BIPs etc.),** which have been awarded the EDL now can consolidate their cooperation towards a more structured joint degree programme, while continuing to offer micro-credentials for its distinct components (potentially still receiving an EDL certification).

## Merging: Joint European Degrees

This final stage represents *the deployment of Joint European Degrees, which automatically carry the European Degree Label.* Like the previous stage and building on it, some prerequisites must be met before deploying the full JED initiative.

## Prerequisites

### ***At European level***

- *An aligned vision on the EQF in relation to the JEDs from relevant stakeholders*, such as the EQF Advisory Group (AG), Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) and the European Training Foundation (ETF), as well as the ENIC/NARIC network.
- Countries have *linked their NQFs to the revised EQF and self-referenced it to the QF-EHEA* to facilitate the recognition of the JED as a qualification.
- *A Joint European Degree certificate template is made available*, reflecting the EDL as a seal of quality.
- *A European Diploma Supplement template is made available*, allowing the inclusion of all partner institutions (including multiple languages) reflecting the JED specificity, the compliance of the learning outcomes with the revised EQF (aligned with the QF-EHEA), as well as the specificities of national systems and in line with the Subject Area Qualifications Reference Frameworks.

### ***At national level***

- *The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes* is adopted by member states that wish to participate in the JEDs initiative.
- *Alignment of the National Qualifications Framework with the European Qualifications Framework* (aligned with the OF-EHEA) for JEDs.
- The JED will be available for institutions where national legislation *allows for the European Certificate, European Diploma Supplement and EDL templates* to be used to issue students' certification.

### ***At institutional level***

- Institutional internal evaluation *structures and procedures* are in place in accordance with the revised ESG.
- The programme coordinator together with partner institutions *issue a single certificate* to reflect the JED.
- Internal and consortium procedures reflect an *alignment between the partner institutions and within the EDL and JED frameworks*.

## Quality Label Building Block

Referencing back to the European Commission's 2023 Report, the table below illustrates the Key building blocks of a quality label (EC, 2023), to which the SMARTT Recommendations were added (in a summarized form). The recommendations reflect the three-stage proposal of deploying and implementing the European Degree Label, followed by a transition towards the Joint Degree Programme, with particular focus on the first stage: **Emerging**.

## Eligibility criteria

Quality Label Building Block	Focus on the building block	SMARTT Recommendations
<b>Scope</b>	Types of HEIs that are eligible to receive the quality label	HEIs across all fields from EU Member States, joint programme coordinators, irrespective of their status as members of a European University Alliance. European University Alliance with registered legal status.
<b>HEIs involved</b>	Minimum number of HEIs involved in the provision of the joint study programme	Minimum two HEIs from EU Member States.
<b>Level of qualification</b>	Qualification awarded upon completion of the joint study programme (by EQF level)	In the Emerging stage – EDL certificate awarded, no qualification. In the Merging stage – qualification awarded upon completion (by EQF level) if the joint programme aligns to the Joint European Degree criteria.
<b>Type of degree awarded</b>	Types of degrees that are awarded upon completion of the joint study programme	<b>In the Emerging and Converging stages</b> EDL Certificate for joint Bachelor programme EDL Certificate for Joint Master programme EDL Certificate for Joint Doctoral programme EDL Certificate (micro-credentials) <b>In the Merging stage:</b> Joint European bachelor’s degree (6E) Joint European master’s degree (7E) Joint European Doctoral Degree (8E) EDL Certificate (micro-credentials)
<b>Essential features of the study programme</b>	Features of the programme that must be part of the joint study programme design	The EDL criteria act as guidelines for the design of the joint study programmes.

Quality Label Building Block	Focus on the building block	SMARTT Recommendations
Quality assurance	Approach applied to accredit/evaluate the joint study programme	<p>If available, the joint programme accreditation based on the European Approach standards automatically offers EDL accreditation (JED accreditation in the Merging stage).</p> <p>If the European Approach is not available, the EDL accreditation can be done by an EDL authorized EQAR-registered agency.</p> <p>If neither option is available, specific provisions will be temporarily employed for particular institutions/countries until one option becomes available (upon a commonly agreed timeline).</p> <p><b>In the Emerging and Converging stages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EDL accreditation at institutional level (or European University Alliance, if registered with legal status and/or on behalf of members) by an EQAR-registered agency.</li> <li>• Internal evaluation of the programme by the coordinator, in alignment with (revised) ESG.</li> <li>• In the Converging stage</li> <li>• EDL accreditation at institutional level (or European University Alliance, if registered with legal status and/or on behalf of members) by an EQAR-registered agency and assessment of Joint European Degree criteria.</li> <li>• Internal evaluation of the programme by the coordinator, in alignment with (revised) ESG.</li> </ul> <p><b>In the Merging stage</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joint European Degree accreditation at institutional level (or European University Alliance, if registered with legal status) by an EQAR-registered agency OR use the European Approach standards in the joint programme accreditation.</li> <li>• Internal evaluation of the programme by the coordinator, in alignment with (revised) ESG.</li> </ul>

## Awarding the Label

Quality Label Building Block	Focus on the building block	SMARTT Recommendations
<b>Proof of eligibility</b>	Solutions regarding how applicants for the quality label must prove they meet the eligibility criteria	<p><b>In the Emerging stage</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For existing programmes - self-assessment by the EDL accredited programme coordinator on the Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure (or similar) based on the EDL criteria (scoring assigned to indicators and supported by a short narrative description/evidence). Different levels of the EDL can be awarded, based on self-assessment score (e.g. Leading, Advancing and Emerging).</li> </ul>
<b>Process of awarding the Label</b>	Description of how the quality label is awarded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The self-assessment could be publicly available on the dedicated platform, ensuring transparency. The awarded programme will also be included in the EQAR database (or similar), under the corresponding EDL accredited institution.</li> <li>For upcoming programmes – the criteria can be validated along with the mandatory programme accreditation process.</li> </ul>
<b>Format</b>	Format of the label (including physical/digital label, elements of digital certification included)	<p><b>In the Emerging stage</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Digital EDL certificate, with the option to save in a printable format (.pdf). A QR code could also be implemented to allow for immediate validation of the printed certificate on the dedicated platform (with digital signatures and other authenticity seals/evidence).</li> <li>The EDL certificate will include information on the partner institutions and their specific identifiers, information on the joint programme and a minimum agreed list of learning outcomes based on the EDL criteria. The EDL Certificate will be added to the Diploma Supplement.</li> </ul> <p><b>In the Merging stage</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Following the implementation of the Joint European Degree, a single certificate/diploma will be issued at the programme level, and the EDL specific information will be included in the newly developed European Diploma Supplement, attached to the certificate.</li> </ul>

Quality Label Building Block	Focus on the building block	SMARTT Recommendations
<p><b>Promotion of quality label programmes</b></p>	<p>Consideration needs to be given to the promotion of programmes that receive the quality label. While those institutions receiving the quality label can use it for their own promotional purposes, a single database of labelled programmes could also be considered.</p>	<p>A single database of labelled programmes should be developed or integrated within existing platforms (e.g. EQAR).</p>

## SMARTT note: EDL in the context of the Bologna Process

Following this analysis, we could see how the EDL builds on and employs existing tools and procedures, aiming to reduce redundancy and complexity in the process.

The implementation of the European Degree Label (EDL) could be seen as **a natural progression and an enhancement of the foundational principles established by the Bologna Process**. It leverages and extends the Bologna Process tools in several keyways to promote higher education quality, mobility, and recognition across Europe. While the Bologna Process expanded and developed a series of tools and procedures to ensure a comprehensive approach for higher education across and beyond all participating states, the complexity of the different national education systems led to various speeds in implementation, different degrees of alignment and of resistance at the national level. **However, the Bologna Process represents a unique initiative in the field of higher education and in policy, proving that cooperation among countries and educational systems guided by common principles can lead to transformation and growth.** *The European Degree Label and the Joint European Degree would rely on the same level of cooperation and commitment to a vision, while attempting to streamline and simplify some of the processes, tools and procedures layered throughout the past decades by reforms driven by both the Bologna Process and by the European Union.*

### For example:

- **European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS):** The EDL builds on the ECTS by encouraging joint programs to adopt transparent and comparable credit systems. This not only facilitates student mobility across borders but also ensures that the workload and learning outcomes are aligned with European standards, enhancing the clarity and comparability of joint programmes.
- **Diploma Supplement:** The EDL uses the concept of the Diploma Supplement to promote transparency in qualifications. By recognizing joint programmes that adhere to specific standards, the EDL ensures that graduates have a clear and detailed record of their achievements that is easily understood and recognized across Europe, thereby promoting employability and further study opportunities.
- **Quality Assurance:** The EDL directly builds on the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESGs) by setting criteria that joint programs must meet to obtain the label. These criteria emphasize quality in program delivery, assessment, and student support services, encouraging institutions to engage in continuous improvement and to adhere to best practices in quality assurance.
- **The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) principles:** The EDL embodies the key commitments of the Bologna Process, such as mutual recognition of degrees, student-centred learning, and the social dimension of higher education. It encourages institutions to develop programs that are not only academically rigorous but also inclusive and accessible to a diverse student population.
- **Enhanced Mobility:** While the Bologna Process aims to remove obstacles to mobility, the EDL takes a step further by recognizing and rewarding programs that excel in providing integrated mobility opportunities for students and staff.
- **International collaboration:** The EDL promotes deeper international collaboration / transnational cooperation between institutions. By setting a common framework of excellence, it encourages institutions to work together more closely in developing and

delivering joint programmes, thereby strengthening the European education sector's global competitiveness.

- **Innovation in teaching and learning:** The EDL encourages the adoption of innovative teaching and learning practices, including the use of digital technologies and pedagogies that support active and collaborative learning, aligning with the Bologna Process's focus on enhancing the quality of higher education.
- **Recognition and visibility:** By providing a label of excellence, the EDL enhances the visibility and attractiveness of European higher education globally. This not only helps in attracting international talent but also ensures that European qualifications are valued and recognized worldwide, thereby extending the impact of the Bologna Process.

**Therefore, 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 European level (Bologna tools) such as the ones above and such as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and its wider adoption across all EHEA countries.** Of course, such a process needs to be closely linked to a reconsideration of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) and 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 the trust among partners and member states, as well as to create shared 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. *Thus, 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 deepening the wide promotion of joint practices in higher education.*



## SMARTT Recommendations: Policy

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 recommendations can be considered to guide the discussions and implementation processes of the European Degree Label and of a Joint European Degree at European and national level:

- 1. Clarity and consistency across the EHEA:** Establish clear, consistent definitions of what constitutes a joint programme, a joint degree, a joint European degree etc. Engage national governments to clarify legal frameworks, addressing legislative barriers that might impede transnational cooperation.
- 2. Coordination and operational guidelines:** Explore the option of assigning a (temporary) Coordinating body for the EDL, that would oversee the deployment and implementation of the EDL and the JED. Provide more guidance on the structure, process, and specific instruments for the deployment of the EDL and of joint European degrees. This could include providing templates, in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, for the EDL/JED certification, the European Diploma Supplement, consortium agreements reflecting the EDL provisions, grading equivalency guidelines, mitigation scenarios for different national/institutional tuition policies, proposed learning outcomes in relation to the EDL criteria, a step-by-step process for awarding the EDL, proposed timelines for implementation etc. In addition, different institutional and transnational measures should be closely overseen by a Coordinating body, such as the alignment of the EDL criteria with the ESG and with the European Approach, the revision of the EQF in correlation with the EDL (and in relation to the EQ-EHEA), and the effect on the NQF, etc.
- 3. Harmonization with existing policies and frameworks:** Align the EDL with existing European educational frameworks, particularly the Bologna Process, ECTS, the European Quality Assurance Framework, and with the European Approach, to ensure compatibility and ease of integration. Leverage existing tools like the (European) Diploma Supplement to provide detailed information about EDL-accredited programmes.
- 4. 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. Facilitate close collaboration between National Quality Assurance Agencies and European networks to ensure the evaluation and accreditation of joint degree programmes are streamlined and effective.
- 5. 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.
- 6. 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 standardized 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.

- 7. Institutional capacity and preparedness:** Develop capacity-building programs for higher education institutions to prepare them for the challenges of designing and delivering joint (degree) programmes, including training on administrative cooperation, curriculum development and digital tools. Foster institutional autonomy by promoting policies aimed at enhancing it, particularly in relation to developing and managing joint programmes under the EDL label, allowing for innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.
- 8. Digitalization 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. Explore the development of a comprehensive digital platform dedicated to the EDL and Joint European Degree initiative. This platform would facilitate application, evaluation, accreditation, and qualification/ certification processes, would serve as a repository for program information, as an EDL database, would offer resources to institutions (potentially a common integrated platform to manage the delivery of joint programmes under the EDL), and provide a communication hub for stakeholders.
- 9. Innovative pedagogies, Digital pedagogy, and e-Learning:** Promote policies that support the integration of these components in joint programmes under the EDL, including through funding for digital infrastructure, training for faculty in digital pedagogy and the development of digital assessment tools that align with the EDL and JED criteria.
- 10. Funding and incentives:** Provide financial support and incentives for institutions to develop and implement EDL-accredited programmes, including grants, research funding, funding for student scholarships, mobility grants 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. Establish recognition mechanisms for programmes and institutions that excel in implementing the EDL criteria.
- 11. Mobility and cooperation:** Promote policies that facilitate student and staff mobility, including simplified visa processes and recognition of qualifications across EU 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. Prioritize student mobility and learning experiences in the EDL's design, ensuring that the label reflects a commitment to student-centred teaching and learning methodologies, also employing flexible learning pathways.
- 12. Inclusivity and accessibility:** Implement policies to ensure the EDL is inclusive, catering to diverse student populations, and promoting accessibility for disadvantaged or underrepresented groups.
- 13. 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.
- 14. 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.

- 15. International cooperation:** Strengthen this component beyond the EEA/EHEA to enhance the global recognition and attractiveness of the EDL and JED, engaging with non-EU countries and international educational networks, with a particular focus on ensuring recognition of the Label and of the Degree outside of EHEA.
- 16. 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.
- 17. Research and innovation:** Foster policies that encourage joint research initiatives between partner institutions in joint programmes under the EDL, including dedicated funding for collaborative research projects, support for research mobility and recognition of joint publications and innovation. Establish innovation labs and/or think tanks within joint programmes focused on solving complex transnational challenges, which can serve as incubators for new ideas, enhancing the research and innovation landscape of the EHEA. Also, further integration could be considered between EHEA and the European Research Area under the EDL umbrella.

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# CONCLUSIONS

Final remarks on SMARTT recommendations

## SMARTT Conclusions

In the evolving landscape of European higher education, characterized by a concerted effort to enhance system interoperability and transnational cooperation, the introduction of the European Degree Label (EDL) emerges as a strategic innovation. *Building on the Bologna Process and the broader aspirations of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the EDL represents a commitment to educational excellence and the facilitation of academic mobility across borders.* This initiative underscores a holistic vision to make European higher education more attractive and competitive on a global scale, building on the successes of existing integration efforts.

The European Commission's exploration into the feasibility and impact of a European Degree Label and of a Joint European Degree respectively, as well as the SMARTT results and recommendations, highlight *the necessity for such initiatives amidst challenges like restrictive national legislations and quality assurance inconsistencies.* By considering various implementation scenarios, including the EDL, the Commission aims to pave the way for more integrated transnational cooperation in higher education. This approach aligns with the broader objectives of the European Education Area (EEA), striving *to create an inclusive, quality-driven, and accessible educational landscape from early childhood through to adult learning, thereby fostering a European identity and enhancing employability.*

The SMARTT Results reveal *a predominantly positive perception of the EDL among program coordinators.* Recognized for its potential to elevate program reputation and strategic value, the EDL is seen as a flexible and adaptable tool that aligns well with long-term educational goals. However, the results also point *to areas needing clarification and enhanced support, such as the measurability of EDL criteria and the provision of more detailed guidance for its implementation. Addressing these concerns, the SMARTT recommendations propose a three-stage approach — Emerging, Converging, and Merging — each stage building upon the last.* This phased strategy aims to facilitate the seamless introduction of the EDL, moving towards a more comprehensive framework for a Joint European Degree.

In **the Emerging phase**, the focus is on defining program types and degrees, ensuring a common understanding across Member States. Recommendations include more structured EDL criteria, organized into thematic clusters for clarity and effectiveness, and the differentiation of certification levels across educational cycles. The proposed awarding process emphasizes institutional autonomy and the internal evaluation of programs, suggesting the EDL be based on institution-wide accreditation rather than program-specific. As the framework progresses towards **the Converging phase**, further definition and national adoption of the Joint European Degree are encouraged, relying on a clear set of prerequisites at the European, national, and institutional levels. This stage anticipates significant resources and a collective commitment to developing and implementing Joint European Degrees. In **the final Merging phase**, the Joint European Degree marks the culmination of this initiative, embodying the highest standards of transnational education and serving as proof to the collaborative spirit driving European higher education forward.

**The SMARTT recommendations, grounded in the principles and tools of the Bologna Process and the objectives of the EHEA and EEA, advocate for a streamlined, inclusive, and quality-focused approach to the development and recognition of joint degree programs. Through harmonization**

with existing policies, enhancement of quality assurance standards, and emphasis on mobility and cooperation, these recommendations envision a cohesive, competitive, and unified European educational landscape.