



# ED-AFFICHE

## European Degree Label

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# Policy Recommendations on the Future of the European Degree (Label)



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# ED-AFFICHE Policy Recommendations on the Future of the European Degree (Label)

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## Introduction to the ED-AFFICHE Policy Recommendations on the Future of European Degree (label)

### About ED-AFFICHE

In 2022, the European Commission (EC) launched a call for European University Alliances to examine and facilitate the delivery of a joint European Degree Label. The ED-AFFICHE Project consortium, composed of six university alliances (**Una Europa, 4EU+, CHARM-EU, EC2U, EU-CONEXUS, and Unite!**) and 51 higher education institutions (HEIs) from 22 different countries, have secured European support.

In consultations with experts, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium will propose possible improvements to the criteria associated with the European Degree Label and co-develop recommendations on the possible assessment procedure, as well as the design and delivery of a future European Degree Label.

Together, the consortium has been successful in securing **the support of 19 national and regional ministries in charge of higher education as well as 15 national accreditation and quality assurance (QA) agencies**. It is the exchange of best practices between those actors and the open dialogue with their universities that carries the real potential to move forward the European Higher Education Area.

### About the document

This document offers a comprehensive array of policy recommendations derived from **input gathered from students, quality assurance agencies, employers, as well as data collected from university legal experts, joint programme coordinators, and national authorities**. Its primary goal is to furnish extensive guidance to the European Commission, member states, universities, and quality assurance



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agencies on facilitating and implementing the European Degree Label, and to some degree, the European Degree. This is to ensure that both serve as catalysts for added value, fostering collaboration and advancement for students and universities alike.

Following an explanation of the methodology employed in gathering recommendations, the document titled “ED-AFFICHE Policy Recommendations on the Future of European Degree (Label)”, delves into various key aspects warranting clarification regarding the European Degree Label. These include:

- **Commentary on the pathways proposed by the European Commission** and potential consequences of introducing a label or degree within the legal framework.
- Provision of **recommendations** for ensuring the successful implementation of these pathways.
- Analysis of the **revised criteria** associated with the European Degree Label provided by the European Commission, informed by opinions collected throughout the project duration, with a focus on the added value these criteria should embody.
- Examination of **potential verification methods** for awarding the label (and potentially a future degree) to the existing and new programmes, emphasizing the advantages of adopting a reviewed European Approach for the initiative.
- Propositions for the **design** of both the label (to be awarded to students and/or programmes) and the degree, along with a thorough analysis of the pros and cons associated with each design.
- Concluding with a **series of recommendations tailored for the European Commission, member states, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and quality assurance agencies.**

Throughout the study, several key themes emerge prominently. These include the pivotal **coordination role that the European Commission must undertake** to ensure a harmonized implementation process for the European Degree Label across member states and HEIs. Additionally, the initiative is seen as a means to **enhance the implementation of Bologna tools**. There is a recognized necessity for ongoing **collaboration among universities and member states** at the national level to exchange best practices and collectively address obstacles. Moreover, the importance of sustained exchange within communities of expertise established within the framework of pilot projects is underscored.





## Methodology

This document is the result of extensive data collection conducted from September 2023 to February 2024. During this period, the ED-AFFICHE team consulted with students, employers, and quality assurance agencies which are associated partners of the project.

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The primary focus of the Work Package 4 has been the criteria associated with the European Degree Label. To gather insights, **three separate surveys tailored to each of the three target groups were developed and distributed to interested parties.**

The student survey was disseminated by individual universities and accompanied by an [explanatory video](#). Similarly, the surveys for employers was distributed by individual universities. For quality assurance agencies, the questionnaire was sent to designated contacts responsible for representation in the ED-AFFICHE project.

The feedback collected through these questionnaires has been compiled in Deliverable 4.1, titled "[ED-AFFICHE Comparative analysis of the criteria associated to the European Degree label and the process behind it](#)". Building upon this, the ED-AFFICHE team **refined the initial criteria provided by the European Commission and solicited further feedback from associated universities and stakeholders.**

A **series of follow up workshops**, held during the first week of February 2024, involved students, employer representatives, and quality assurance agencies. These meetings were guided by a **set of questions concerning the criteria**. Stakeholders' priorities were noted, and in collaboration with the ED-AFFICHE version of the criteria, formed the basis of the **ED-AFFICHE's position on the revised criteria drafted by the European Commission.**

The recommendations in this document are grounded in the extensive data collected over the past months, and its significance lies in the variety of information it contains. They were presented during the [ED-AFFICHE Final Dissemination event "Key recommendation for the European Degree Label"](#), held on 5 March 2024 online, attended by more than 300 participants from HEIs, student community,



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student organizations, representatives from the European Commission (EC), ministries, quality assurance agencies, and Higher Education associations.

**Chapter 1 of the document, “Concept of European Degree and implementation phases”,** offers insights into the pathways proposed by the European Commission during a meeting with pilot projects on 30 January 2024. These insights are largely derived from feedback received from universities and quality assurance agencies. Page | 8

**Chapter 2, “Redrafting Criteria”,** provides a detailed account of how the ED-AFFICHE team facilitated collaborative work among various stakeholders and offers recommendations on the new criteria proposed by the European Commission.

**Chapter 3, “Verification Methods”,** draws on opinions gathered during the ED-AFFICHE mid-term event on 22 November 2023, as well as discussions with universities and QA agencies.

**Chapter 4, “European Degree (Label) Visual”,** explores different design alternatives for the label and discusses whether it should be awarded to the programme or the student (graduate). This section is primarily based on consultations with universities, national authorities, students, and employers.

Finally, **Chapter 5 will offer policy recommendations** on how to facilitate and enhance the implementation of the European Degree (Label).

## 1. Concept of European Degree and implementation phases towards it

The possible concept of the European Degree has been researched in the PPMI study [“The road towards a possible joint European Degree: identifying opportunities and investigating the impact and feasibility of different approaches”](#). Both the European Degree as a label and the European Degree as



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a qualification were described there, together with their strengths and weaknesses as well as their feasibility.

### 1.1 Difference between label and degree as to their feasibility

The European Degree Label and the European Degree have both the same baseline starting points (list of criteria, possible verification methods), they can, however, have a very distinctive impact depending on how they are introduced to the higher education environment in member states.

#### ***Introduction of a label***

When speaking of the label, two distinct situations need to be considered:

1. One of the main advantages of European Degree envisaged **as a label** is that it **doesn't require much changes or effort in introducing it**, as long as it is not a new legal concept but rather is based on already existing practice of issuing all kinds of certificates by HEIs. Therefore, the resources (workload, funding, timeline etc.) and complex procedural set-up could be limited to the very minimum.
2. On the other hand, should the member states or EC see the potential in creating a **new legal category** and embed the European Degree Label in the national/regional legislation, then the consequences would be twofold: the ease of introduction of the label would be lost, the amount of resources needed would increase (that also means the timeline would be significantly prolonged), but at the same time there would be a real possibility of affecting legislation and implementing certain changes to the regulations governing joint programmes (or creating such regulations at all in countries where they do not exist at the moment).

#### ***Introduction of a degree***

Should the European Degree be introduced as a new qualification into the legal landscape, the feasibility would be similar as the second road for the European Degree Label described above. Similar, but not quite as complex as embedding a new qualification, which might involve actions such as introduction of new degree titles, new diploma templates, supplementing the national quality framework, fine-tuning of the HEIs internal procedures etc. Only some of those would be relevant for the label.





## 1.2 Difference between label and degree as to their potential to remove obstacles in national/regional legislation

One of the main concerns of the ED-AFFICHE consortium has always been to make sure that the **momentum created by the European Degree Label works as an enabler to make the design and implementation of (types of) joint programmes less cumbersome**. The question the ED-AFFICHE Consortium would like to bring to the table is to what extent one is more suitable for this result than the other.

The short answer is both are similar vessels to reach this distinction. Neither the label, nor the degree in itself lead to the removal of obstacles for designing and conducting joint programmes with a particular focus on joint degrees. Both have, however, the potential to do so, and the conditions needed to reach that objective are similar. Both require a process in which (i) the national/regional legislator accepts to use the concept and introduce it in the national/regional legislation, it should be noted though that even if introduced in the legislation, a label differs distinctively from a degree, and its meaning is somewhat diluted. It can, however, serve as a middle-step towards introduction of the European Degree; (ii) decide which legal rules are applicable to this concept that is introduced in the legislation; (iii) decide which legal rules are not applicable to this concept (i.e. from which legal rules the concept is exempted). In both instances, this exercise only truly **removes obstacles if countries move forward in a coordinated fashion** while doing this, especially for step (iii). If they make other decisions, then differences and incompatibilities in national/regional legislations will continue.

From a conceptual point of view, the pathway of the degree form had the advantage of creating something completely new whereas the label is a QA seal attached to an existing concept (attached to a joint degree). By introducing European Degree, a new category would need to be embedded in the national qualification frameworks. It is not just a label attached to an existing joint degree; it is a new type of degree. The difference is significant and relevant for all the steps described above. If a label is attached to an existing joint degree, then all legal rules applicable to joint degrees in this particular country are already in place. If, however, a new type of degree is created, then it might be re-examined whether the regulations pertinent to joint programmes and joint degrees already in place should also be applied or this new degree as well. They only become relevant if legislators decide to do so in step





(ii). Since European Degrees are, so to say, a subcategory of joint programmes (like joint degrees, double degrees and multiple degrees), all regulation designed for joint programmes would apply for them as well (automatically). If any exemption is to be given to European Degrees, it would need to be codified appropriately and separate set rules should be created. If that is the case, then the difference between European Degree Labels and European Degrees becomes theoretical (at least, when looked at from the angle of the potential to remove legal obstacles): both would have the regulation of joint degrees as a default rule, unless specific rules for European Degrees have set it aside.

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The ED-AFFICHE team has no clear preference between multiple pathways from a theoretical point of view. As long as they are conceptually clear, have been well thought-through and get the full support of member states during the roll-out phase, the impact they will have on international collaboration in higher education seems similar. Obviously, the concept of a new national qualification is a bigger change than the creation of a label, as the former amends the qualification framework and the latter does not. The difference seems, however, more political in nature than truly impacting the effort programme directors will have to make to create and implement European Degrees. That said, from a practical standpoint, there is a clear preference for the concept of the European Degree Label. It is clear that the ministries of education are very attentive to the concept of European Degree at this point in time, and that momentum exists to discuss with them about the necessary legal changes to implement this concept in their national legislation. During the national workshops that were organized with the ministries within the ED-AFFICHE project, ministries did seem to have a clear preference for the label. The idea of a European Degree was somewhat threatening to them, as they felt their national competence for education could be at risk (to some extent). **Starting the roll-out of the European Degree via a coordinated label-phase then seems like the sound way to move forward, if the aim is not to alienate member states from the start and to get as many of them on board as possible – which our 3.2 Deliverable shows is the only way to move forward if legal obstacles are to be removed.**

### 1.3 Pathways towards the label/degree

Even though the ED-AFFICHE Consortium does not have a clear preference between label or qualification from a theoretical point of view, there is, however, a clear preference on the pathways to move towards one or the other.



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During a joint session with the 6 different pilot projects which took place on 30 January 2024, the European Commission expanded on the pathways, by presenting the choice the European Commission had made for the European Degree, which will be communicated to the member states before the European elections. In essence, three pathways were described, providing three different entry points for member states: (i) Joint European Degree Label pathway; (ii) Joint European Degree pathway; (iii) European Degree pathway. The difference between the second pathway and the third is that the third option presupposed the existence of a legal entity (bigger than singular HEI, e.g. European Universities alliance) which can issue degrees.

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The three pathways are not mutually exclusive and would co-exist. In that sense, rather than speaking of “different entry points” for member states, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium considers this strategy to be closer to “different tracks” for member states. Entry points require one single track, and member states can begin from different starting points, but are then all on the same track towards the same end goal. Although the ED-AFFICHE Consortium did not see the communication to the member states yet, it seemed from the meeting with the European Commission that such a timeline in which pathway (i) (the label pathway) needs to lead towards pathway (ii) (the joint qualification pathway) would not be part of the communication. Nothing would prevent member states from moving from pathway (i) to (ii), of course (on the contrary, this seemed to be the preferred option), but nothing would force them to take this step either. If such is the case, then talking about different tracks seems fairer than about different entry points. After all, there is a real possibility of different tracks co-existing for a long period of time, or even permanently without obligation to move to a subsequent pathway. This means that some countries might have introduced a European Degree Label, whereas others might have introduced a European Degree Qualification at some point in time. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium is rather sceptical of such co-existence. Forming a joint programme between several countries where a HEI from one country is able to issue a joint degree (which could apply for the European Degree Label), and other countries are able to issue a European Degree, is bound to cause new legal obstacles. Even if the criteria for the label and the degree are the same, the qualification in the national qualification framework is different. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium fails to see how this could lead to a simple accreditation procedure using the European Approach if the procedure cannot lead to the same degree



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(programme) being accredited. A possible way to overcome this is to ask member states to keep the issuing of a label open parallelly to issuing a European Degree. This would however blur the concept of European Degree if, on the one hand, member states can have different choices of tracks in place, and on the other, member states can have more than one choice of track in place at the same time. Without having seen the communication and without knowing if a binding timeline will be communicated, the ED-AFFICHE team is reluctant to give recommendations on this point as they may miss the mark. However, at first instance, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium is encouraging the **European Commission to make one single timeline with one single track, preferably one in which all countries shift from one status to the other at the same time, rather than designing different parallel tracks that co-exist**. This means more concretely that the ED-AFFICHE Consortium prefers all member states starting from the label phase at the same time, and then jointly moving to the degree phase at another time, rather than them being free to choose between two phases at any time.

This is all the truer if the European Degree (as a label, or as a qualification) has as an objective to remove obstacles in national/regional legislation. Our 3.2 deliverable showed that the design and implementation of joint programmes is cumbersome if different legislators have made different choices that then need to be applied all together by programme coordinators. These difficulties can be addressed, but only if member states proceed in a coordinated fashion. That means that they have to tackle similar obstacles in a similar fashion, but also that they need to do this *for the same type of programmes*. The co-existence of European Degrees in some countries with a European Degree Label in other countries (or even in the same country, see previous paragraph) might only add to the complexity and undermine the need for coherence and coordination that is essential for removing obstacles in national/regional legislation.

#### 1.4 Third concept of European (single) Degree / third pathway

As for pathway (iii), the European Degree issued by a legal entity, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium has not collected data throughout the lifespan of the project to make a substantiated analysis thereof, as the concept was shown to the pilot teams only at the end of the pilot phase, and the details of this pathway have not been communicated yet. What the Consortium took away from the discussion with the other pilot projects during the meetings with the European Commission was that this pathway should be





seen in the distant future, as it implies the creation of a legal status for alliances that then gets the competence to behave as a HEI and issue degrees.

The ED-AFFICHE Consortium wants to signal that there is a more feasible way to reach a similar effect (although, admittedly, different in nature), which is to continue the pathway of a QA framework for alliances which entails cross-institutional accreditation competence for alliances. If such competence would be accompanied by cross-institutional competence to award themselves the label of the European Degree or the qualification of the European Degree, then sustainable alliances with their own QA framework would have a fast-track towards the European Degree as they would no longer need to go through the European Approach. The pros and cons of using the European Approach as a verification method will be described below, but the message the ED-AFFICHE Consortium wants to give here is that a short(er)-term alternative to the long-term third pathway exists without shaking up the high education landscape in a way that member states might feel reluctant to accept.

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## 1.5 Conclusions

From a theoretical point of view, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium acknowledges that the European Degree as a label or a qualification are both sound ideas. Both could make a positive difference for international collaboration in higher education, if they are well-thought through and get full support of the member states via a coordinated implementation. When looked at through the angle of the potential to remove legal obstacles, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium concludes that both could have a similar potential to do so. As for the proposed concept of European Degree issued by legal entities, introduced so very recently to the pilot projects by the Commission, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium has too little information and no data to conclude.

From a practical point of view, **the ED-AFFICHE signals that the label seems the only way to move forward now without the risk of alienating some of the member states.** As the Consortium feels that the co-existence of different concepts of European Degree at the same time needs to be avoided, that means that the ED-AFFICHE team **encourages the European Commission to start in the label-phase for all member states and then (potentially) shift towards the qualification phase jointly for all member states at the same time.** As for the proposed third pathway, the ED-AFFICHE signals that cross-



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institutional accreditation of (joint) degrees combined with cross-institutional issuing of the (joint) European Degree (Label) seems more realistic than the emergence of a (single) European Degree issued by an alliance.

## 2. Redrafting criteria

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This part of the document presents recommendations to the European Commission regarding the criteria linked to the European Degree Label. These recommendations stem from insights gathered from various stakeholders and partner HEIs involved in the project. They are crafted through a process of compromise, aiming to incorporate a broad spectrum of perspectives within the consortium.

The criteria for the European Degree Label are essential to assess the quality and **reflect the added value of the joint programme**. To gather diverse perspectives on the criteria, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium engaged in consultations with students, employers, QA agencies, and joint programme directors, utilizing targeted **questionnaires and interviews**. These insights were further enriched through discussions with national authorities via questionnaires and the facilitation of national workshops by HEIs and associated partners of ED-AFFICHE. Additionally, recommendations were solicited from the ED-AFFICHE External Advisory Committee, comprising representatives from Erasmus Student Network, European Student Union, European University Association, and European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, to enhance the label's value within the educational landscape. With a focus **on prioritizing the interests of the primary beneficiaries – students** (as evidenced by the collection of 2546 questionnaire responses) – the Consortium meticulously crafted recommendations for each criterion. The views of the students have been completed with the ones of employer representatives, QA agencies, and joint programme directors and coordinators. More insights on these opinions can be found in the ED-AFFICHE's 4.1 Deliverable [“Comparative analysis of the criteria associated to the European Degree label and the process behind it”](#).

The collaborative efforts spearheaded by ED-AFFICHE Consortium demonstrate that compromise is attainable, and **centralized coordination can facilitate productive conversations**. We recommend the European Commission to continue fostering such platforms to bolster discussions among diverse stakeholders, ensuring that every voice is heard and represented.



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## 2.1 Reflections on the (almost) final version of the criteria

European Degree Label criteria			EQF Levels
Transnational programme organisation and management	Higher education institutions involved	The joint programme is offered by at least 2 higher education institutions from at least 2 different EU Member States.	6, 7, 8
	Transnational joint degree delivery	The joint programme is jointly designed and jointly delivered by all the higher education institutions involved.	6, 7, 8
		The joint programme leads to the award of a joint degree.	6, 7, 8
		A joint diploma supplement is issued to students, providing a comprehensive list of the outcomes that students attain throughout the programme.	6, 7
		The joint programme describes the learning outcomes and credits in line with the ECTS Users Guide.	6, 7
	Joint arrangements for the joint programme	The joint programme has joint structures and/or mechanisms to establish and monitor joint policies and procedures describing the curriculum as well as organisational and administrative matters in accordance to national/regional legislation of all partners. Students' representatives are part of the decision-making process to define the joint policies and procedures.	6, 7, 8
	Quality assurance arrangements	Internal and external Quality Assurance is conducted in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The institutions, the study field or the programme are evaluated by an EQAR registered agency.	6, 7, 8
		The joint programme is evaluated using the standards of European approach for quality assurance of joint programmes (EA).	6, 7, 8
Graduate tracking	The joint programme monitors graduates through a graduate tracking system.	6, 7, 8	
Learning experience	Student-centred learning	The joint programme is delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in the learning process, and the assessment of students reflects this approach.	6, 7, 8



	Interdisciplinarity	The joint programme includes embedded interdisciplinarity components.	6, 7, 8
	Labour market relevance	The joint programme aligns with labour market requirements by incorporating intersectoral components or activities and the development of transversal skills.	6, 7, 8
	Digital skills	The joint programme includes components and actions related to the development of advanced digital skills of students, all tailored to the capacities and circumstances of the joint programme, ensuring alignment with its scope and scholarly focus.	6, 7, 8
	Transnational campus – access to services	The programme has joint policies for students and staff to have access to services in all participating HEIs in equivalent conditions as all enrolled students.	6, 7, 8
	Flexible and embedded student mobility	The joint programme offers deep intercultural experience, including a minimum of 1 period of student physical mobility (that can be split in several stays) at another or several partner institution(s) representing overall at least 60 ECTS at EQF 6 level and 30 ECTS at EQF 7 level. The joint programme has a policy offering alternatives for students who are unable to travel.	6, 7
		The joint programme offers deep intercultural experience, including a total of at least 6 months of physical mobility at another or several partner institution(s). The joint programme has a policy offering alternatives for students who are unable to travel.	8
	Co-evaluation and co-supervision for dissertations	Dissertations are supervised by at least two supervisors and co-evaluated by co-supervisors or a committee with members from at least 2 different institutions located in 2 different countries.	8
European Values	Democratic values	The joint programme's joint policies promote and adhere to democratic values.	6, 7, 8
	Multilingualism	During the joint programme, each student is exposed to at least 2 different EU official languages.	6, 7, 8
	Inclusiveness	The joint programme commits to wide participation by fostering diversity, equity and inclusion by adopting tailored measures to support students and staff with less opportunities.	6, 7, 8
		The joint programme commits to respect the principles of the European Charter for Researchers	8

		and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers.	
	Green transition	The joint programme agrees on policies and actions related to environmental sustainability and implements measures to minimise the environmental footprint of its activities.	6,7
		The joint programme commits to the principles of the MSCA Green Charter	8

Version sent on 13 February 2024

The updated criteria from the European Commission have integrated nearly all the recommendations gathered by the ED-AFFICHE Consortium. However, certain criteria may still require further refinement based on insights gathered by our team. Below are our collected thoughts on this matter:

- **Transnational joint degree delivery**

Recommend specific provisions for regulated professions to encourage joint programmes.

- **Consortium Agreement**

Include adherence to a validated Consortium Agreement as a criterion for joint programmes.

- **Joint arrangements for the joint programme**

Highlight the importance of compliance with national legislation in joint programme structures.

- **Quality Assurance arrangements**

Advocate for the mandatory adoption of the European Approach for joint programmes – and give a transitional period for countries to apply it.

- **Sustainability and Inclusiveness**

Add references to European values and declarations to reinforce the European aspect of programmes.

- **Labour Market Relevance**

Emphasize active engagement of labour market representatives throughout the programme's lifecycle.

## 2.2 Conclusions

These recommendations are the culmination of **extensive data collection efforts** involving surveys with replies from over 2000 students, 60+ employers, and 190 joint programmes directors. Continuous consultations with ministries and collaboration with 51 HEIs across 22 countries have also contributed to this already plentiful and sometimes quite diverse landscape. The updated criteria from the



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European Commission have largely integrated ED-AFFICHE's recommendations, but **further refinement is in our point of view still strongly advised in order to coherently take into consideration all the needs of stakeholders rather than leave some details unaddressed.** It would be indeed beneficial to **use this momentum and efforts of pilot projects to comprehensively address all layers and needs in the criteria.** Specific recommendations include provisions for regulated professions, adherence to a validated Consortium Agreement, emphasis on compliance with national legislation, advocacy for the mandatory adoption of the European approach for joint programmes applying for the European Degree Label, inclusion of references to European values, and active engagement of labour market representatives throughout the programme's lifecycle.

### 3. Verification methods

#### 3.1 The choice of verification method and the link with the legal consequences of the European Degree (Label)

The main message that the ED-AFFICHE Consortium wants to deliver to the European Commission is that **any procedure needs to be fit for purpose.** Although that seems self-evident, it is actually one of the biggest challenges in coming up with recommendations for the verification of and the awarding of the European Degree (Label). There are many uncertainties, leading to the conclusion that currently the ED-AFFICHE Consortium is unable to know exactly what is awarded, so that designing a process that is fit for purpose is theoretically impossible. Whether a label is awarded, or a qualification is obviously quite a different matter. But even within the first pathway (label) the difference is important whether a label remains something created as a branding tool at European level without any legal consequences in the member states, or whether the label is integrated into national/regional legislation and used as a pathway towards sandboxes, default legislation or deregulation (see also 3.2 Deliverable).

What the ED-AFFICHE Consortium wants to avoid, is that a complex, costly or cumbersome procedure is designed, that eventually leads towards little result. Although this message might seem redundant, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium feels that there is a realistic threat that the pathway towards the European Degree will lead exactly towards this undesired situation. From one side, it seems logical to assume





that most member states will start with the creation of a European Degree Label, rather than immediately embedding a European Degree into their national qualification framework. That was at least the message the Consortium got during the national workshops that were organised with the associated ministries of member states. Even though in general they were interested and willing to cooperate with the initiatives of the European Commission, the enthusiasm towards a label was larger than towards a qualification, especially with the concept of the latter remaining unclear and some concern of member states' competence in education lingering on. At the same time, the message coming from the European Commission is that the label on itself will not remove any legal obstacles (*“while the label will provide a powerful branding tool, it won't solve the obstacles encountered by universities to establish joint degree programmes”*). The central process for this label is demanding: the European Approach is a serious procedure with a real workload of staff required to succeed. For pathway (i) – European Degree as a label – this means that there is an uneasy truth: a serious procedure threatens to lead to very little, which does not seem fit for purpose. One might of course respond that this is only a temporary issue that disappears as soon as the European Degree as a qualification becomes a reality. Choosing a sustainable verification and awarding method that already has this future policy in mind, will diminish workload by making sure that HEI staff does not need to change its procedure (for the degree) immediately after they have implemented it (for the label). The ED-AFFICHE Consortium, however, did not get the message during their national workshops that the European Degree is to be foreseen in the immediate future. As a result, the Consortium remains uncomfortable about the question if the procedure is really fit for purpose, as long as the label remains just a label. If indeed a work-intensive procedure leads to little added value, the enthusiasm for the European Degree might have disappeared before the label has had a chance to evolve into a qualification.

Luckily, there are ways to overcome this threat. In our 3.2 Deliverable, we already signalled that even during the label phase, the European Degree could be more than just a label. That is why in this 4.2 Deliverable as well (in a previous section), the ED-AFFICHE Consortium did not have a clear preference for the degree over the label. From the point of view of removing obstacles or boosting the Bologna tools, both could have a similar effect, as long as the ambition for the label phase is sufficiently high (cfr. supra, on the difference between the label or the degree). The main message thus is that, given



the expected lengthy label phase, the need for member states to actually “do” something with the label (integrate in their legislation as category of joint degrees for which legal exemptions are in place) is obvious. Otherwise, the European Approach as verification method is exaggerated and the enthusiasm for the European Degree might diminish.

### 3.2 Possible verification methods

The possible verification methods for the European Degree (Label) and the ways of issuing it were already described in the PPMI report “The road towards a possible joint European Degree: identifying opportunities and investigating the impact and feasibility of different approaches”<sup>[1]</sup> (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Burneikaitė, G., Pocius, D., Potapova, E. et al., [The road towards a possible joint European degree – Identifying opportunities and investigating the impact and feasibility of different approaches – Final report](#), Publications Office of the European Union, 2023). In essence, they consisted of the following options:

1. Programme level self-evaluation approach as foreseen in the pilot phase;
2. Institutional evaluation: each university evaluates its own joint programmes through the competent bodies and awards the label to those satisfying the criteria;
3. Inter-institutional evaluation at the level of the European University alliances performed by an independent cross-alliance body of experts in QA in education (possibly a sub-group of FOR-EU or a specific group created in the framework of the upcoming Communities of Practice);
4. National agencies in charge of accreditation/QA for higher education evaluate the compliance of the joint programmes separately and award the label to the national university involved in the consortium;
5. National agencies from the EQAR register through the European Approach process, meaning that one national agency entitled to do so will award the label to the whole consortium;
6. EU level with a new body created for this specific purpose and an Erasmus+ like approach: the individual joint programmes submit an application in which they explain in which way the programme satisfies all the mandatory criteria. This approach would be the most suitable in case of specific funding allocated to the joint European Degree Label initiative.





This list actually contains three different verification and awarding methods. The first three items in the list relate to forms of (self)verification and (self)awarding of the label or the degree. The fourth and fifth item relate to a process in which the national QA agencies are involved in the verification and awarding. The last item relates to a specific body at EU level performing the verification and awarding procedure.

By integrating the European Approach in the mandatory criteria for the European Degree, implicitly a choice on verification method for the criteria and the issuing of the label to the joint programme, seems to have been taken. **If the European Approach is used for accreditation and quality assurance, then it seems evident that this procedure is also used for the verification of the criteria and the issuing of the European Degree (both as a Label and as a qualification).** Based on the data gathered in ED-AFFICHE and the stakeholders interviewed, the Consortium agrees with this choice (for further nuance, see below). For that reason, the main focus hereunder will be on the European Approach as verification method. The other verification methods mentioned by PPMI will however indirectly also be part of the analysis and recommendations hereunder, insofar they impact the (consequences of the) choice for the European Approach as verification method.

### 3.3 The European Approach as verification method

Overall, the associated partners and stakeholders interviewed by the Consortium saw the **added value of having one single verification procedure for the European Degree (Label) by an EQAR registered agency.** The main reasons are:

- Self-verification as a manner of issuing the label to a joint programme has the benefit of not creating any additional processes. Especially for institutions who do not need to go through programme-based accreditation, this was a concern (see also below, on the points of doubt of some associated members on the choice for the European Approach). For most, the exclusion of self-verification made sense nonetheless. If the European Degree will be used as a worldwide branding tool, then the integrity of the label/degree is essential. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium captured some doubts whether self-verification merits the desired level of trust. The 2.2 Deliverable also showed that many programme directors and HEIs staff feel uncertain about applying the proposed criteria to their programme, sometimes because they feel



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uncertain if they understood the criteria properly, sometimes because they are uncertain of the answer (unease about the regulatory framework behind the joint degree delivery, uncertainty if internal QA arrangements are in line with the ESG,...). Using a procedure through an EQAR registered agency avoids unfair use of the European Degree (Label) and shifts the responsibility for assessing the criteria to those agencies who have the competence to assess them.

- Using one EQAR registered QA agency rather than multiple agencies in all of the involved countries, received widespread support by the associated partners. The full partners agreed that the criteria are attached to the programme, not to the HEIs involved in them, so that only one decision is possible for the entire programme: either the programme fits the criteria, or it does not. Having several QA agencies assess this matter in parallel to each other in different member states, thus seems an unnecessary burden. If you use one single EQAR registered agency that has the competence to take a decision for the entire joint programme and all HEIs involved in it, the European Approach automatically springs to mind because this is quintessentially what the European Approach is.
- A separate body at EU level to assess the criteria (and issue the European Degree Label to programmes) was undesired by the people interviewed for the ED-AFFICHE project. The main reason was the fear of adding to the complexity of the design and delivery of joint programmes by creating a new procedure. All partners agree that the verification of the criteria should tap into the existing accreditation and/or QA procedures, rather than consist of a new procedure. Some also mentioned that, if an EU body would be used, the European Degree would lose the potential of boosting the Bologna tools, more specifically the European Approach.

As a result of the foregoing, most possible verification methods of the PPMI study are almost automatically reduced to one single obvious candidate: pick one QA agency to assess the criteria and issue the label to the joint programme. Interestingly though the underlying presumption of this reasoning is that the QA verifies the criteria and then also awards the label *to the programme* (and thus: not to the students who study in the programme). Issuing the label to the students is a matter for





the HEIs running the programme, albeit indirectly, as they are actually issuing a joint degree to their students for graduating from the programme, which has gotten a label.

Two main counterarguments were given against the use of the European Approach. Some of the HEIs, legal experts, and ministries, mentioned that European Approach is not considered as a lean procedure. From interviews conducted by ED-AFFICHE team a concern stemmed about the cost, the complexity, the lack of trust in foreign QA agencies, or the additional workload (especially for those HEIs who have the competence of (cross)institutional accreditation, see also next paragraph). The main message there was: if the European Approach is put front and centre for the verification of the European Degree, then a review of the procedure to make sure it is fit for purpose is needed.

The other argument against the use of the European Approach came mostly from ministries and HEIs who have a system of (cross)institutional accreditation. For them, the use of the European Approach threatens to result in additional workload, if it is not needed for initial accreditation and if other QA measures are in place. That being said, as described above, despite this concern most of those HEIs still favored a separate verification procedure to make the European Degree Label meaningful, with only one clear exception from a ministry and university from one of the German Länder. Most of the interviewees mentioned that the debate was often only theoretical, especially in the larger consortia, since as soon as on HEI needs to go through programme-based accreditation to have a joint programme that is legally valid, the other HEIs are indirectly subject to programme-based accreditation as well. As a result, requiring the European Approach for the European Degree is only truly additional workload in those consortia where all involved HEIs benefit from institutional accreditation prerogative. For the other consortia, the European Degree verification can tap into the accreditation procedure that was taking place anyway.

That last part of the reasoning was a message that the ED-AFFICHE Consortium captured often during interviews: **the clear demand to have the European Degree tap into the existing QA and accreditation procedures**. Whether for initial verification and issuance of the European Degree (Label), or for re-verification and conformation of the issuance after a set number of years: ideally the mechanisms that already in place are the tools used for the European Degree as well.







The European Approach makes sense in that regard as the main tool for awarding the European Degree or Label and for (re)verification after a set amount of time). If the procedure is for purpose, it should be the last work-intensive way for the consortium to go through accreditation and QA procedures.

Joint programmes where all the partners have the competence of (cross)institutional accreditation however do not need the European Approach and have a larger amount of freedom to develop their own QA procedures. The reason why most associated partners and interviewed partners (especially QA agencies) still favored the use of the European Approach for the European Degree was that the European Degree (Label) should be something new compared with the current range of joint programmes, if it aims to have added value. Boosting the Bologna tools in as many countries and HEIs as possible could be part of this added value. In addition, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium has pointed out in its 3.2 Deliverable that an external verification procedure can become a powerful communication message to give to member states if negotiations are conducted in the member states to deregulate, create sandbox or make legislation secondary to consortium agreement. The fact that an external agency verifies that the minimal criteria are met could give member states the reassurance they need to deregulate. For that reason, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium agrees that the European Approach could be made mandatory, even for countries and HEIs who have the competence to self-accredit their programmes. That being said, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium also understands the need to tap into existing processes, and understands the struggle that some HEIs have, and the reluctance of one HEI, to accept the European Approach on top of self-accreditation and own QA procedures. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium thinks that **a compromise could be found if long-standing alliances (like, but not limited to) of European Universities develop their own QA procedures at cross-institutional level**. A number of the criteria for the joint degree really relate to joint policies, procedures and arrangements at consortium-level. For single HEI with its own QA procedures, the self-verification of such joint criteria can be challenging, however, for cross-institutional QA procedures who have this jointness as embedded feature, self-verification of the criteria for the European Approach could be meaningful and qualitative. If a compromise needs to be found for the interplay between the European Approach as verification method for the European Degree (Label) on the one hand and HEIs who can self-accredit at the other hand, then the ED-AFFICHE Consortium recommends to give leeway to the HEIs with cross-





institutional QA procedures and in the future possibly also cross-institutional accreditation competences (cfr. upcoming recommendation on quality assurance and automatic recognition) rather than giving the competence to self-verify the criteria for the European Degree to any individual HEI who has the competence to self-accredit. This recommendation is for both the label phase and the degree phase of the European Degree.

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If the European Approach is used as a procedure for verification and awarding/accrediting, then the process will need some (minor) amendments, as the agreed standards and procedure currently do not entail the criteria nor the verification thereof. During a workshop with QA agencies on the verification methods, the QA agencies stressed the desire for the European Approach to be implemented by all countries as it is, rather than meddling with the procedure. During interviews with associated partners about the country-specific obstacle lists, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium heard a different sound from some of the HEIs, who found the European Approach expensive or complex. As such, **the use of the European Approach for the verification of the European Degree (Label) criteria, could be an enabler to investigate if the European Approach could become leaner and less expensive in some countries.**

If the procedure and the agreed standards need to be amended in any event to accommodate this additional verification, then the moment is there to make any further amendments in cocreation with the HEIs and/or member states who have expressed concerns about the European Approach. An important factor here is that the European Approach is a Bologna tool and thus the agreement of all Bologna partner countries is needed to amend it. For those reasons, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium stresses **the need for the European Commission to reach out to all Bologna partner countries** as quickly as possible. Even though the European Degree (Label) is a project spearheaded by the European Commission, the underlying desire of the Commission to boost the Bologna tools (a desire supported by the ED-AFFICHE Consortium) nonetheless brings along the uneasy truth that the success of the project partially depends on countries that are not member states of the European Union. If they block the use of the European Approach for verification and reverification of the European Degree criteria, the inclusion of the European Approach as a mandatory criterium could turn out to be a blocking factor for the entire project.



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In the label phase, the European Approach will result in a decision of a QA agency awarding the European Degree Label to the programme. Whether or not a certificate is given to the students that proves that the joint programme they graduated from was awarded the European Degree Label, is a matter that is not automatically connected to the use of the European Approach. This verification method and granting of the label thus leaves open different manner to tackle the question of the visual identity for the European Degree (cfr. hereunder). In the degree phase, the European Approach will result in a decision of a QA agency accrediting the European Degree programme. Once again, which visual for the diploma is then used when the European Degree is awarded to the students by the HEIs involved in the European Degree programme, is not automatically connected to the use of the European Approach. This verification method and accreditation of the programme thus leaves open different possibilities for the visual identity of the European Degree as well (cfr. hereunder).

A last topic that the ED-AFFICHE Consortium wants to bring to the attention here, is the matter of reverification. It is reasonable to consider the awarding of the European Degree Label or the accreditation of the European Degree programme to have a temporary nature. After a set amount of time reverification or reaccreditation of the label or degree will need to take place. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium did not tackle this question in surveys or interviews with the associated partners, so has only limited data to come up with recommendations on this matter. During one of the workshops with the QA agencies, this question was asked. The QA agencies confirmed the need for reverification. They stressed the importance of such reverification to be performed during planned QA activities in the joint programme, rather than being done during a separate procedure designed specifically for the reverification. The fact that the European Approach has been chosen as a mandatory requirement for QA procedures seems important: **the European Approach could be used as a vessel for reverification**, meaning that a six-year time period for reverification seems evident. That being said, **in order for the reverification to tap into existing QA procedures as much as possible, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium recommends to set a time range for verification** (for example between 5-7 years after initial verification) to accommodate the need of the joint programme consortia to the maximum extent.

### 3.4 Conclusions



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Given that the use of the European Approach is a mandatory criterium in the list of criteria for the European Degree (Label), it is the evident verification method for verification of the criteria if red tape is to be avoided.

### ***In the European Degree Label phase***

In practice, this means that:

- For **new joint programmes that need programme-based accreditation**, they will go **through the European Approach for accreditation**, and the same procedure can be applied **to verify the criteria and award the label to the programme**. HEIs choose if and how this translates into a certificate given to students.
- For **new joint programmes that do not need programme-based accreditation** for any of the participating HEIs, the **European Approach** does still seem like a **sensible choice as verification method for the label**, if the European Approach **can be amended in a way that a lean, single procedure is created withing the approach**, just to check the criteria for the label. Given the emphasis on joint policies in the label criteria, a European Approach as additional procedure is not an excessive demand, although once cross-institutional accreditation would be in place for those alliances with joint (QA) policies, the Consortium would reconsider their stance.
- For **existing joint programmes that have already received programme-based accreditation**, the **European Approach** does still seem like a **sensible choice as verification method for the label**, if the European Approach **can be amended in a way that a lean, single procedure is created within the approach**, just to check the criteria for the label. An alternative here is that the programme waits until the moment **reaccreditation** is needed (if such is the case) or until the programme is subject to a QA procedure, and applies the European Approach at that time for both the label verification and the reaccreditation/QA check.
- For **existing joint programmes that do not need programme-based accreditation** for any of the participating HEIs, the **European Approach** does still seem like a **sensible choice as verification method for the label**, if the European Approach **can be amended in a way that a lean, single procedure is created withing the approach**, just to check the criteria for the label. Given the emphasis on joint policies in the label criteria, a European Approach as additional procedure is not



an excessive demand, although once cross-institutional accreditation would be in place for those alliances with joint (QA) policies, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium would reconsider their stance.

### ***In the European Degree phase***

In the degree phase, the previous distinction between accredited and new programmes becomes irrelevant. Given that the European Degree will be a new degree, all programmes will need to get reaccredited. **The European Approach could serve that purpose for all programmes that need the new accreditation.** If and how (cross)institutional accreditation will interfere with the previous sentence, will depend on the member states' reaction to the recommendation of the European Commission on Quality Assurance and Automatic Recognition. Most associated partners did not have a stance on this point yet, so the underlying data is lacking for the ED-AFFICHE Consortium to make recommendations on this point.

## 4. European Degree Label Visual

### 4.1 Introduction

Within the framework of the ED-AFFICHE Project, various design proposals have been developed pertaining to the European Degree label and diploma, aimed at enhancing the recognition and visibility of joint programmes. These proposals delineate distinct pathways for the issuance of certification, each presenting unique advantages and considerations. This chapter provides an overview of these proposals, discussing their respective rationales, features, and potential implications for stakeholders involved in the European Higher Education landscape. Additionally, recommendations are based on stakeholders' feedback, ensuring that key concerns and preferences, such as the importance of clear endorsement by the European Commission, are addressed. Importantly, it is emphasized that the choices presented below are not mutually exclusive, offering flexibility and adaptability to cater to diverse needs and contexts within the EHEA.





## 4.2 ED-AFFICHE Design Proposals

### 4.2.1 Label awarded to the students (pathway 1)

The first design proposal of ED-AFFICHE Consortium corresponds to the label version of the European Degree that is conceived as to be awarded individually to students upon their graduation. Possible arguments for this solution are multiple:

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- It can be **implemented into practice almost immediately** as it does not interfere with any preexisting legislation.
- It would also bring **visibility to the European Degree brand** since every graduate would receive it along with their diploma and diploma supplement.
- If digital signatures were allowed and recognized by all partners, the only cost dedicated to the physical label itself would be printing, making it an **economically very effective solution**.

However, there are also very reasonable arguments against this form: European Degree Label attests that the joint programme in question passed the corresponding criteria. Why would then graduates of this said programme receive individual certification of this fact? **The label certifies the qualities of the programme, but not the qualities or performance of any individual student.** In a similar manner, the students do not receive accreditation resolution nor similar documentation verifying the quality of the programme – much less at the point of their graduation. These – undoubtedly positive – circumstances can be accounted for in terms of diploma and diploma supplement, but to produce extra personalized certification, whose object was in no way related to the individual receiving it, can be questioned as not appropriate and misplaced.

Nevertheless, ED-AFFICHE's design proposal is concentrated around several essential features connected to five categories. First, it contains the names and logos of the HEIs behind the joint programme as well as the signatures of their statutory representatives. Second, it identifies the holder by stating their name, date of birth, and date of graduation. Third, it also lists the name of the programme itself and information about its EQF level. Fourth, it contains features marking affiliation to European initiatives – for example, logo of the European University alliance, possible logo of the



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European Degree brand and a statement that the programme in question has been found in line with the criteria defined on European level. Fifth, it bears quality features such as registration number (of the certificate/label), statement that this document is not to be mistaken for a full degree (diploma), and the logo of the issuing institution that is not printed but incorporated into the paper itself (in the middle).

#### 4.2.2 Label awarded to the programme (pathway 1)

The second hypothetical model also operates with label form of the European Degree, only this time not awarded individually to students, but to the joint programme itself. The main argument for this model follows up on the most essential drawbacks of the previous one – **since it is the quality of the programme that is assessed, it is more appropriate to award the result of the process to the object of the evaluation**. As a result, instead of personalizing the document for each student, it is **the HEIs conducting the programme that would receive it**. The body issuing it in this case would be the QA agency conducting the assessment. This model offers a **closer and more transparent connection to the process of quality evaluation** as it is not the student that is evaluated, but the programme. In terms of resources, the distribution would be simpler, entailing only an exchange between the party responsible for the evaluation (the QA agency) and the HEIs conducting the joint programme.

The hypothetical price to be paid for this solution is lower visibility, as the awarding of the label would happen only between the institutions without the “export” among graduates. However, since this model is connected to the quality assessment among the institutions, it is fair to say that it would be attached to different step of the process. Whereas the previous model covers the relation between the second actor (HEIs) and the third one (students), this one focuses on the exchange between the first one (QA agency) and the second one (HEIs). It is then conceivable that both could coexist at the same time – considering that the QA agencies (or similar body) would need to produce a statement on the result of the quality check regardless of whether the students themselves would receive the certificate or not. Lower publicity and recognition among general public could therefore be considered as the biggest drawback of this option.





Because the focus of this model is directed on certifying alternate stage of the process, the graphical design was also adapted to account for the structural differences. Since it is not issued by the HEIs, but by the QA agencies, so too the roles of the institutions needed to be exchanged – the HEIs are the receiver in so far as they are co-responsible for the joint programme in question. The proposal therefore lists the general title “European Degree Label”, identifies the programme by title, level, and newly also institutions that conduct it. The statement is also slightly adjusted to account for the new format. The biggest difference is the date, which in this case should represent the date of the ruling of the fulfilment of the criteria, while ED-AFFICHE Consortium recommends also to consider more concrete data – for instance duration for certain number of years and/or timeframe that corresponds to valid accreditation etc. The signatory of this version is in ED-AFFICHE Consortium’s understanding best reserved for the statutory representative of the QA agency that issues it (which is absent in the previous model altogether).

#### 4.2.3 Logo on the diploma awarded to the graduates (pathway 1 and 2)

The third variant we prepared represents an even more different take on the question of the label's nature as it moves past beyond the point of standardized document as such. Instead, it corresponds to a **logo format type of the certification**. The soundest argument advocating for this model is its ease of application and compatibility with 21st century **digital environment**. After any joint programme passes the evaluation process, individualized version of the logo would be generated (with unique ID) and available to be placed on any associated degree (diploma), diploma supplement, web, communication and dissemination materials, possibly also into any kind of electronic ID etc. This could be **sustained with little to no maintenance costs, distributed almost instantly and with very low environmental impact** – no additional printing would be required. One of the most positive aspects of this form is also that it not only does it not exclude any of the other three models, but **it can be actually combined with all of them – the previous form of the label as well as the next one (full degree) can benefit from a strong visual element that highlights the attachment of the label to the joint programme in question, while also allowing the programme itself to market its success** (on website, communication and dissemination documents etc.).







Arguments against this model are, based on the data collection, few – since it does not resemble the standard university diploma like the first version of the label, it cannot be attacked for posing as a “fake degree”. Nevertheless, in all its applications, this model requires a vessel onto which it is placed. A potential drawback could then be the fact that in itself, it cannot be hung on a wall or put into a frame – its visibility would be to a large extent derived from the form of the framework into which it is put. Additionally, logos are more prone to being judged on aesthetic and artistic basis than documents such as degrees. Therefore, attention must be paid to the selected form.

ED-AFFICHE Consortium’s proposal for this type of visual was created with several structural features in mind. To highlight that these elements can be applied in various ways, uniquely for this solution two versions were produced. Main concern was again not to dwell on any particular aspect of the designs, but to focus on covering the most important conceptual regions. Therefore, even this design proposal is a draft, and its implementation into practice across EHEA and possible endorsement by the member states could very well **necessitate an open call for the final version**. Nevertheless, as stated above, ED-AFFICHE’s proposals are concentrated around several key elements. First, the colours yellow and blue and shape of a star to clearly signalise affiliation to EU’s visual symbols. Second, the words “European Degree” to naturally emphasise the brand of the initiative and promote it further. It could be argued that the word “label” might or should be listed as well, but in our understanding, the label refers to the format of the certification, and not to the brand itself – the criteria are still the same. Therefore, in line with the terminology of the European strategy for universities, Consortium opts not to include this word in the logos. Third, the proposals contain also a section reserved for a code (sequence of several characters) that could be composed of numbers as well as letters. The code could be very practically used to identify each programme and – if generated in an appropriate way – possibly also the institution that conducted the evaluation, date until the certification is valid, and other similar circumstances that bear significance for the quality culture of the process. The difference between the two ED-AFFICHE’s proposals consists in the approach to the logo’s “dynamics” - whereas one includes higher number of round or curved elements, the other is predominantly composed of straight lines. While the more conservative proposal might resemble a flag-shape visual, the more dynamic one goes one step further in terms of its symbolism: it includes a group of stars on one side of the visual and singular star on the





other, resembling the mobility aspect of the transnational education. The two sections are connected by an arc, further stressing the connection between both aspects – the original, the initial and the domestic on one side, and the venturing into the unknown and expanding one’s horizons on the other, both deriving their meaning from their juxtaposition to their necessary counterpart.

#### 4.2.4 Diploma awarded to the students (pathway 2)

The fourth and last graphical design that was prepared by the ED-AFFICHE team, is the **full degree**. Even though the pilot projects were predominantly conceived to focus on the label, ED-AFFICHE Consortium considered the difference between the label – in its various iterations – and the full degree as practically, legally, and conceptually significant. To demonstrate these structural differences, it was deemed as important to prepare a corresponding template even for this type of document. The main advantage of the degree is self-explanatory – unlike the label, **it is the very document that bestows academic title upon the holder**. Whereas the label has limited legal consequences and must accompany another degree, **this form of the European Degree would present standalone document issued on behalf of the individual HEIs** (superseding previous form of the degree, either joint, double, or multiple). This solution would therefore represent a full integration of the European Degree initiative into the member states' legislation. Reaching this stage would very likely mean increased recognition of the whole notion of the European Degree, as the concept of the label accompanying standard degree can be to some extent confusing.

Possible arguments against opting for this model are once again linked to its strongest suits: since it would replace previous joint or multiple degree, some stakeholders might avoid this solution to keep the previous one. Most prevalent reasons for doing this would be very likely linked to overall scepticism towards the European Degree brand. Since higher education in EHEA is regulated on national and or regional level, it might be perceived inappropriate to issue a degree that somehow circumvents the national and or regional level, which enables the HEI to conduct higher education in the first place. The most prevalent reasons to posture against this form are not linked to the downsides of the merging of the degree (bestowing academic title) and label (attesting the programmes compatibility with the criteria) into one, but rather to abandoning the institutional or national form of the degrees. **To address**





**these concerns, our graphical design therefore attempts to exhibit strong links to the institutional and national identity of the HEIs.**

In terms of features, this version of the European Degree resembles the most the first version of the label. It is issued by the HEIs that jointly operate the respective programme, therefore their identification (by names and logos) and validation (signatures of statutory representatives) are the dominant elements. The graduate is once again identified by their name, date of birth, and date of graduation. The study programme's name and EQF level are also displayed. The draft proposal also features a logo (in top left corner) of a European University alliance and a placeholder logo for the European Degree initiative. What separates the degree from the previous designs is the listing of the affiliated legislation – each HEI engaged in the programme states the legal basis which enables it to issue the appropriate academic title. The titles are another distinctive feature, as they are naturally absent from the label designs. Usually, the titles may vary in concrete form (Master of Arts, Master, Magister etc.) and abbreviation (MA, M.A., Mgr, etc.) so we propose to list each version on behalf of every HEI to insure maximum transparency and compatibility with corresponding legislation.

### 4.3 Conclusions

All four of the visual prototypes introduced above have their attractive and appealing features, but also the challenging ones. Naturally, the more legally significant solutions will require more adjustments by the member states and would be more complicated to implement as a result. It is, however, ED-AFFICHE Consortium's recommendation to not underestimate this co-dependency: **There are no quick-fix solutions for the task at hand and quality of the results will be intrinsically tied to the attention that is given to the care with which it is introduced into the legal frameworks of individual member states.** Label awarded to students without any basis in national or regional legislation, awarded on the basis of a self-assessment, without clearly elaborated relationship to any national qualification framework, and without consensually accepted approach to the process and methodology of evaluation could backfire by alienating some of the stakeholders involved in the process. This is the reason why ED-AFFICHE Consortium decided not to award the label during the project's duration. The first three visuals introduced above also manifest the plurality of possible formats. What is more, all of



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them could co-exist at the same time: Certification for students, HEIs, and logo do not exclude one another. Therefore, **it is ED-AFFICHE recommendation to stress and prioritise the quality of the brand (regardless of whether in the form of a label or a full degree) by providing clear guidelines as to who certifies what and to whom, and what are the differences between them.** Progressing too quickly and issuing any documentation without appropriate dialogue with and within member states could provide immediately visible results but hamper the implementation and recognition of the European Degree brand for years to come at the same time.

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To avoid that, **ED-AFFICHE drafts were constructed in a way that should allow seamless individualisation by different actors.** All of them (except the logo) are constructed in bilingual format – to possibly comply with national legislation demanding the label or the degree to be issued in the national language. In cases when this is not needed nor required, singular version in English could also be considered. However, it would make very good sense **to have a version of the document (regardless of whether the label or the degree) in all official languages of the EU.** While the students would receive a version corresponding to the circumstances of the issuing institution, the possibility to download the certification in the other languages could ensure problem-free recognition and endorsement by the individual member states. **ED-AFFICHE therefore recommends, in terms of the visuals, to focus on cluster of features that would serve as common denominator (which can include types of information displayed as well as graphic elements), while also opening the possibility for further modification and individualization whenever needed.** The reason for that is that the construction of joint diplomas is notoriously difficult issue as it is, and to impose a strictly singular format could make it very difficult to implement it across EHEA globally. If, however, the EC would proceed with one format, then ideally this format would pave the way for a format-free joint diploma form. This means member states needs to be involved in a coordinated fashion so that they modify their legislation to accommodate any type of joint diploma format the partners need. The third or the fourth visual could serve that purpose and could be a means to talk to legislators about restrictive legislation detailing the format of the joint diploma.



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## 5. Policy recommendations

### 5.1 Introduction

The objective of this part of the 4.2 Deliverable is to offer recommendations aimed at fostering and improving the implementation of the European Degree Label. These suggestions are grounded in the findings and insights amassed throughout the duration of the ED-AFFICHE project's implementation phase. They are informed by extensive consultations with a diverse array of stakeholders, as documented in Deliverable 4.1. Additionally, the more detailed recommendations articulated in the ED-AFFICHE Deliverables 2.2 and 3.2 contribute to the formulation of these overarching recommendations.

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### 5.2 Recommendations for the European Commission

Based on the foregoing analysis, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium presents several recommendations for the European Commission (EC) to consider. In the Consortium's view, **the EC should assume a central coordinating role in overseeing the European Degree initiative, encompassing both the development of criteria for the European Degree Label and the establishment of a robust verification method.** These recommendations are structured not by their relative importance, but rather as a logical progression of the initiative's lifecycle. Moreover, they are informed by the feedback and rankings garnered during the ED-AFFICHE Final Dissemination Event.

#### 5.2.1 Coordination and leadership

Given that the European Degree is a flagship initiative introduced by the European Commission, **it is imperative for the EC to assume a distinct role in coordinating the project and its leadership.** This leadership translates into engaging in discussions with member states regarding the seamless integration of the concept into national and regional legislation. These discussions should extend beyond the EU to encompass the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), especially if the European Approach is deemed essential as a verification method (see 3.2 and below). Additionally, key stakeholders such as QA agencies, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) should actively participate in these discussions (see below).



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### 5.2.2 Scope of the European Degree project

ED-AFFICHE Consortium emphasises that to ensure a higher impact, **the European Degree should not be limited to the universities from the European Union, not even centred only around the European University alliances**. Some stakeholders (students and programme directors) were nonetheless emphasising the **role of EU alliances as testbeds for the European Degree**, highlighting the quality of the joint programmes they design and deliver with multiple partners (which is, indeed, different from most existing joint programmes that are often limited to two partners). However, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium feels **higher impact and inclusiveness would be achieved by applying it to all programmes**.

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While advocating for efforts in national legislation to incorporate the changes related to the criteria and the necessary funding to set this initiative in motion, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium acknowledges that there may be limitations to expanding the European Degree to all Bologna Process countries or even Erasmus+ programme countries.

### 5.2.3 Link to Bologna process

QA agencies, member states of the entire EHEA, employers and students, main actors of the Bologna process, should be actively involved in designing and enacting a framework to implement European Degree on a common level.

The ED-AFFICHE Consortium strongly recommends that **QA agencies play a pivotal role in the verification process, ideally through the application of the European Approach**. This entails one QA agency conducting verification for all HEIs involved in a given programme, ensuring a streamlined accreditation process. The expertise of QA agencies is crucial for a seamless execution of the accreditation and criteria verification processes. To enable QA agencies to effectively fulfil this task, it would be ideal for **member states across the entire EHEA to align themselves with the implementation phases of the European Degree**. Given that member states of the EHEA are pertinent actors in amending Bologna tools for the European Degree project (such as the European Approach and the European Standards and Guidelines), their involvement from the project's inception is imperative. **The ED-AFFICHE Consortium emphasises the importance of expanding discussions beyond the**



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**member states of the European Union to encompass all member states of the EHEA.** The ED-AFFICHE Consortium advises the EC to initiate this coordination process in Tirana, recognising the urgency of commencing efforts to persuade the entire EHEA of the added value of the European Degree. Time is of the essence in launching this persuasive initiative.

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**A revised version of the existing Bologna toolset** (European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, the ESGs, as well as funding schemes like Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, communications on diploma supplement form, etc.) **should be prepared aiming to align the toolset and ensure compatibility with the European Degree initiative.**



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### 5.2.4 A roadmap for introduction of implementation phases

Given the potential introduction of two types of European Degree awards (as a label and as a qualification) and the current lack of detailed information, it is evident that clarity is imperative. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium, along with our associated partners and participants in the Final Dissemination Event, firmly believes that the success of the European Degree hinges significantly on a **clearly defined roadmap for its implementation and subsequent evolution** (both in depth, e.g., from label to qualification, and in width, e.g., from EU member states to the EHEA) so involved actors, and especially member states, could plan the European Degree adoption and integration.

Several **key points** need **to be addressed** to ensure a successful implementation:

- **Consistency of criteria:** it must be clarified whether the same criteria will be associated with both the label and the qualification.
- **Transparent transition:** a transparent transition process from label to qualification, along with a clearly communicated timeline, is essential for stakeholders.
- **Legal consequences:** the legal consequences associated with both types of awards need to be clearly defined and communicated.
- **Simplicity of the process:** regardless of the chosen type of award, the process for programmes to achieve a European Degree should not be overly complicated but tailored to its intended purpose.

Not to hinder the ongoing legal framework revision, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium advocates not to leave both awards simultaneously active. **A coordinated process in which all members start in the label phase and move to the degree phase at the same time is recommended.**

### 5.2.5 Criteria

The updated criteria presented by the EC have already largely incorporated the recommendations put forth by ED-AFFICHE. However, further refinement is strongly advised from our perspective to comprehensively address the diverse needs of stakeholders.





ED-AFFICHE has provided specific recommendations that have not yet been integrated, including **provisions for regulated professions, adherence to a validated Consortium Agreement**, emphasis on **compliance with national legislation** while formulating joint policies and procedures, **mandatory adoption of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes** applying for the European Degree Label, inclusion of references to **European values**, and **active engagement of labour market representatives** throughout the programme's lifecycle. The significance of collaboration between the labour market and universities in the context of European Degree Label associated criteria was underscored by the participants of the ED-AFFICHE Final Dissemination Event.

Should the finalized list of criteria include elements not introduced in the legislation across a significant number of member states, such as the European Approach, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium recommends implementing a **transitional period** before the criterion becomes mandatory. This allows member states ample time to amend their legislation accordingly.

The Consortium recommends **the EC to provide clear guidance on the nature of the criteria** —whether they represent quality standards or a vision for the structure of joint degrees. The Consortium reiterates its previous recommendations to the European Commission, emphasising that the design and delivery of joint programmes, especially teaching methods and curricula, should be guided by sound pedagogical choices rather than political objectives. That means that **framing the criteria as quality standards**, rather than as curricular choices, seems the wiser approach.

A final but crucial recommendation pertains to the potential implementation phases (label and fully-fledged degree) of the European Degree initiative. **All affected stakeholders, including member states, QA agencies, and HEIs, must be informed if the criteria remain consistent for both concepts.** Clarity on this matter is essential for effective planning and execution.

### 5.2.6 Practical guidelines on criteria interpretation

Throughout the extensive process of engaging in multiple consultations with various stakeholders on the criteria, including the detailed mapping of study programmes to assess their compliance with the criteria, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium has observed a significant shortcoming in verification process. It has become evident that each criterion is susceptible to subjective interpretation, underscoring the



critical need for clear and unambiguous guidelines regarding criteria definition and interpretation. The terms ‘joint degree’ and ‘joint programme’ have, for instance, yielded disparate interpretations across different countries and universities. This divergence in interpretation extends to various criteria, including transversal skills (notably highlighted during the ED-AFFICHE Final Dissemination Event), physical mobility alternatives, joint policies, democratic values, and digital or green skills, among others. These examples, while not exhaustive, illustrate potential sources of confusion, particularly during the pivotal moment of criteria verification.

In response to these findings, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium advocates **for the leadership of the European Commission in crafting a comprehensive *guidebook* for the criteria description/implementation of European Degrees**, whether as labels or qualifications. This guidebook, from perspective of ED-AFFICHE, is envisioned to serve HEIs and entities responsible for criteria verification, first of all, QA agencies (see below), but also European University alliances, etc.

The guiding methodology should offer support to programme directors, facilitating the seamless incorporation of the specified elements into their programmes while maintaining transparency during the verification process conducted by authorised entity.

Practical guidelines shall be communicated to member states, especially undergoing legal framework revisions and shall also assist HEIs administration to remove institutional barriers and have a roadmap on how to adopt the European Degree Label in practice.

**The ED-AFFICHE Consortium recommends entrusting the preparation of the guidelines to QA agencies, facilitated through EQAR/ENQA.** This collaborative effort, in consultation with the six pilot projects which have acquired substantial expertise in interpreting, verifying, and redefining European Degree Label criteria, ensures a comprehensive and well-informed approach to guideline formulation under the coordination by the EC.

### 5.2.7 Model of the consortium agreement

The significance of possessing a comprehensive and high-quality consortium agreement has recently heightened, prompted not only by the introduction of a redefined European Degree Label but also by



national legislation, where regulations for programmes are increasingly incorporated into consortium agreements. However, programme consortia or HEIs may lack the necessary resources and experience to independently undertake this task.

To address this challenge, **the European Commission, drawing upon best practices from existing joint programmes consortium agreements negotiated within European University alliances and the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters consortia, is urged to prepare a model consortium agreement.** DESCA (Development of a Simplified Consortium Agreement) could serve as a model for this. This initiative aims to establish a model consortium agreement template, delineating the topics and sections to be addressed through joint policies. During the development of this model, due consideration should be given to the fact that in some member states, regulations at the national/regional level already specify basic elements that such agreements should contain. This consideration should persist as long as these matters remain regulated at the national/regional level, as outlined in [3.1 Deliverable concerning the mapping of legal obstacles](#). Importantly, the criteria for the European Degree Label should be seamlessly integrated into the model consortium agreements, along with specific items requiring attention in the development of joint policies.

### 5.2.8 Verification methods and actors

By incorporating the European Approach into the mandatory criteria for the European Degree Label, it appears that an implicit decision has been made regarding the verification method for the criteria and the subsequent issuance of the label to joint programmes. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium acknowledges the potential benefits of making the European Approach mandatory, even for countries and HEIs capable of self-accrediting their programmes. However, the Consortium also recognises the challenges faced by some HEIs and the reluctance of certain institutions to embrace the European Approach alongside their existing self-accreditation and QA procedures.

In light of these considerations, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium proposes that the **verification of whether a joint programme meets the criteria** and can award the European Degree Label to students be **conducted by a single EQAR-registered QA agency**, chosen by the joint programme consortium. The decision reached by this selected QA agency would then be universally accepted in all participating



countries, eliminating the need for each country's individual QA agencies to independently verify the label's awarding.

Although the criteria for the European Degree Label share similarities with established frameworks such as the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) and the criteria for the European Approach, the Consortium suggests **a distinct and lean verification procedure**. This new procedure, while somewhat **aligned with the European Approach**, differs fundamentally in nature. It does not pertain to the legal basis for running the programme (accreditation) but focuses on determining whether a programme aligns with the European Degree Label-associated criteria. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium emphasises the importance of maximising efficiency in this process, advocating for the integration of necessary documents and verification procedures, reflecting the lean nature of the proposed new procedure. Moreover, introducing it as a new procedure will not necessitate the ratification of the European Approach by Bologna Process countries, which might be a protracted and potentially unsuccessful process.

New procedure can be developed under coordination by ENQA/EQAR by national QA agencies, where the European Commission is leading this initiative in alignment with other decisions and procedures for full roll-out of the Initiative.

With this approach, the **joint programmes consortium would apply for the European Degree label:**

- For **new programmes**, the Consortium recommends applying for both the European Approach for programme accreditation and the European Degree Label.
- For **existing (accredited) programmes**, the application is solely for the European Degree Label. Here, an EQAR-registered QA agency would verify compliance with the criteria using the new 'lean' procedure and confer the European Degree Label to the programme. Re-accreditation or QA cycles could be leveraged for awarding the European Degree Label.

If the **European Degree transitions into a qualification**, the previous distinction between accredited and new programmes becomes irrelevant. Given that the European Degree is considered a new qualification, all programmes would need to undergo reaccreditation. The European Approach could



serve this purpose for all programmes requiring new accreditation. The impact of (cross)institutional accreditation on this recommendation will depend on member states' responses to the European Commission's recommendation on Quality Assurance and Automatic Recognition. As most associated partners have not yet formulated a stance on this point, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium lacks sufficient data to provide recommendations in this regard.

The European Approach could be utilised for reverification, implying a six-year time period for reverification. However, to align with existing QA procedures as much as possible, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium suggests establishing a flexible **time range for verification** (e.g., between 5-7 years after initial verification) to fully accommodate the needs of the joint programme consortium.

The ED-AFFICHE consortium stresses that the European Approach and the development of a new aligned verification procedure is a serious commitment with a real workload for staff attached to it. In order to make this procedure fit for purpose, the European Commission should ensure that, already in the label phase, the European Degree has sufficient added value (financing, branding, removal of legal obstacles for this category of joint programmes) in order for this procedure to be fit for purpose. If there is a mismatch between procedure and added value, the applications to receive the label could be limited and the project would not reach its fullest potential as an enabler of change for international collaboration in higher education.

### 5.2.9 Template of a European Diploma

Should the European Degree be introduced as a full qualification, a **real enabler would be to design a unified diploma template at a European level that would serve as a joint diploma**, following suit of the diploma supplement template that has been in use already. Having a European Degree diploma was notified by the participants of ED-AFFICHE Final Dissemination Event among **the top priority recommendations**.

The ED-AFFICHE Consortium proposes different design templates for European degree label and qualification awards. It is crucial that the label and actual diplomas remain clearly distinguishable.





All of the proposed visuals in this deliverable could co-exist at the same time: certification for students, HEIs, and logo do not exclude one another. Therefore, it is ED-AFFICHE recommendation to stress and prioritise the quality of the brand and to focus on cluster of features that would serve as common denominator, rather than to pick one visual and exclude all others. If, however, the EC would proceed with one format, then ideally this format would pave the way for a format-free joint diploma form. This means member states needs to be involved in a coordinated fashion so that they modify their legislation to accommodate any type of joint diploma format the partners need. .

### 5.2.10 Visibility and branding

When the time comes, ED-AFFICHE Consortium proposes the European Commission to launch a **branding campaign** to clearly explain and promote the pathways towards a European Degree in all the member states and throughout EHEA, HEIs, employers, and particularly among students. The added value of the European Degree Label and/or a European Degree for HEIs and students should be clearly articulated. Stakeholders should also be appropriately informed of the advantages of hiring a candidate who has received a European Degree or has followed an EDL awarded programme.

To boost those efforts it is strongly encouraged to introduce one template of a certificate, one logo – **uniform visual identification tools** that will be used by the actors engaged in the process of awarding the European Degree already at the label phase (and certainly in the degree phase, where a uniform diploma format will need to be in place).

Once the pathways have already been presented and adopted by the member states, the ED-AFFICHE Consortium suggests the European Commission to set up a **website presenting all the existing European Degrees and European Degree Label Programmes**. The consortium has no clear preference whether the European Commission hosts this website as a branding tool, of whether EQAR/ENQA host the website as a registry (see recommendations below). Should a pathway of awarding European Degree by a legal entity such as European University alliance be introduced and accepted by member states, then on the above-described website (repository/catalogue) there should be a distinction within the European Degree programmes between those jointly awarded by institutions from different countries and those awarded by an alliance with a legal status. This website should be user-friendly, a



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search engine where students can easily find the programme that best suits their needs (selection based on study field, country, European degree, European degree label, institutions involved, etc.).

### 5.2.11 Funding

One of the most frequent comments during our meetings with programme coordinators and students is that the European Commission should pay special attention to the **implementation of funding instruments for European Degree programmes** both dedicated to the programmes as an incentive to apply for European Degree and students' scholarships.

- **“Seed funding” for programmes to apply for European Degree Label.** This instrument may target already existing programmes both to meet the criteria and to apply for the label as the process itself is human resources intensive.

The ED-AFFICHE Consortium **strongly encourages the European Commission to prioritise funding for European Degrees.** Negotiating joint degrees with multiple HEIs across different countries is a time-consuming process, and the development of high-quality joint courses also requires a significant investment of time. Designing a European Degree programme is a costly endeavour, and the Erasmus Mundus label has demonstrated that dedicated funding instruments play a crucial role in enabling the creation of joint programmes.

The Consortium's research in WP2, "[Mapping of criteria associated with European Degree label](#)" revealed that nearly all joint programmes at the second-degree cycle with more than two partners were funded through Erasmus Mundus. For European Degrees involving a larger number of HEIs, the associated costs are expected to be high. The financial implications and risks may pose a significant obstacle for programme directors to create European Degrees that go beyond the traditional two-HEI approach or to transform existing joint/double degree programmes to meet European Degree criteria. Therefore, dedicated funding is essential for facilitating the design process. While European University alliances may have funding through their grant agreements, a dedicated funding instrument is crucial for the success of the European Degree beyond the context of these alliances.

- Align existing **financial instruments to attract students** and to implement joint programmes (e.g., Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, Marie Skłodowska-Curie PhD Scholarships).



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The ED-AFFICHE Consortium has gathered evidence indicating that joint programmes, especially those taught in another language or involving students registered in more than one university, often do not benefit from national funding schemes. Consequently, these programmes are required to charge tuition fees, which can be higher than fees for national programmes. The Consortium not only advocates for funding to support students, as seen in existing programmes like Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, but also recommends a review of financial instruments targeting similar programmes.

Notably, joint first cycle degree programmes currently lack support from any financial programme. The Consortium suggests considering either one financial instrument covering all three cycles (first cycle studies, second cycle studies, and PhD) of programmes or separate instruments for each cycle. Additionally, the option of transforming existing financial programmes (e.g., Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, Marie Skłodowska-Curie) for the same purposes is recommended for review. This approach aims to incentivise existing programmes to pursue European Degrees and demonstrates a clear position from the European Commission in support of the European Degree initiative.

- **Review Erasmus+ Students and staff mobility rules** to accommodate possible financing of required mobility periods by European Degree criteria.

The ED-AFFICHE Consortium emphasizes the need for funding instruments that go beyond the existing Erasmus+ scheme to provide additional scholarships and financial support for students enrolled in European Degree programmes. The (quasi)obligation for students to go on a period of physical mobility is new in most programmes (since mobility periods like Erasmus have mostly been optional). Under the European Degree, although alternatives for students who cannot travel will exist, the physical mobility will be firmly embedded in the DNA of the programme design for each student. If the higher education area is to remain accessible and inclusive, then this (quasi)compulsory mobility period is a real concern.

The Consortium acknowledges that the European Commission plays a crucial role in addressing this concern, as member states may look to the EC to formulate a plan for providing scholarships or mobility grants for students. The Consortium encourages the European Commission to investigate how existing Erasmus regulations might pose challenges for the European Degree initiative, particularly as European Degrees may involve physical mobility periods of various lengths, including three or four semesters abroad. This concept of "home university" and "studying abroad" will also change if more programmes







emerge where students (for example first-cycle students) are placed together in one university for the first year (regardless of their nationality) and then flock to different universities for the remainder of their studies.

### 5.2.12 Continue the work

The ED-AFFICHE Consortium strongly encourages the European Commission to find a way **to keep the six pilots active throughout this process**. The knowledge and contacts gained through the pilot phase will form an indispensable network. Instead of maintaining six parallel teams, forming a single working group with interested pilot team members seems logical to the ED-AFFICHE Consortium. It was also apparent during [ED-AFFICHE Final Dissemination Event](#) (5 March 2024) that the work is not close to being done, and that it is expected from the stakeholders as well that it will be continued. Furthermore, other HEIs and institutions were interested in supporting this collaboration.

## 5.3 Recommendations for QA agencies

### 5.3.1 Additional workload, upcoming processes

The QA agencies will likely play an integral role in the European Degree scheme, whether it is envisaged as a label or qualification. Agencies might be responsible for either issuing the label, checking compliance with the criteria for the label or qualification, or both (which is most likely). We recommend **QA agencies to actively participate in the European Degree framework co-creation process, specifically in the development of the guidebook on implementation with the extended description of criteria and their verification**. ED-AFFICHE Consortium acknowledges the expertise of QA agencies in accreditation processes and believe that this approach would lead to the most rational application of the European Approach and will prevent duplication of processes, documentation, and so on.

Bearing in mind this perspective, QA agencies should already consider the variety of resources needed to be part of this process, such as workload, staff, timeline, etc. Throughout ED-AFFICHE's deliverables, the need for coordinating action at a European level has been emphasized. Assuming that such a framework for the European Degree will be designed, QA agencies should take an active part in the process and prepare to embed the framework into their internal procedures. For that, creating a clear workflow on both European and national/local levels is indispensable.



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### 5.3.2 European approach procedure to be amended

Following up on the ED-AFFICHE Consortium's proposal on the verification methods, a single EQAR-registered agency will be authorised to verify if a joint programme complies with European Degree-associated criteria. To ensure that the process is streamlined, minimally repetitive with programme accreditation, and does not interfere with the obligation to use the European Approach for the programme's accreditation when the Consortium has the capacity to self-accredit, ED-AFFICHE proposed **creating a new procedure somewhat aligned with the European Approach**. We expect that QA agencies will be active in co-designing this procedure. New joint programmes would go through the European Approach and this new procedure for both the accreditation process and for verification and awarding of the label. Existing joint programmes would only need to go through the European Approach procedure for the verification of the label (during the label phase at least). Obviously, internal procedures will have to be reviewed and prepared to embed these new processes to verify and award the European Degree (to the programme). Additionally, the momentum could be used to update ESGs, where joint programmes as such shall be included, and made compatible with the European Approach.

### 5.3.3 Cooperate and coordinate

As stated before, coordination at a common European level is key to success, and the same applies to QA-related processes, especially since QA agencies will play a crucial role in the award and evaluation of the European Degree. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium recommends that **EQAR and/or ENQA take up this leading role in close consultation with the European Commission, and for QA agencies to cooperate closely with them**. In this setting, **EQAR and/or ENQA would be most equipped to develop a European framework for European Degrees or European Degree Labels** to be implemented in all countries with EQAR-registered agencies. If the European Degree Label criteria and the verification method are operationalized, it is essential that they are involved, not only to ensure a uniform interpretation of the criteria and an equal process in all countries but also to make sure that the European Degree has been discussed within the EHEA and not only by the QA agencies of the countries of the EU.





### 5.3.4 Electronic certification system

**An online platform (website) should be established by EQAR or the European Commission where all European Degree-awarded programmes are listed.** This website should feature a search function to enable students to find the programme that aligns with their requirements. The Consortium does not express a clear preference for whether the European Commission hosts this website as a branding tool or if EQAR/ENQA hosts it as a registry (please see recommendations above).

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This recommendation to EQAR primarily includes implementing a built-in functionality for graduates of European Degree-awarded programmes to easily and quickly download a certificate attesting that their programme received a European Degree Label. This functionality should be developed and maintained in-house to address potential cost issues and GDPR considerations. It should be synchronised or linked with the websites of EQAR-registered national QA agencies. In the proposed template found in 4.2 Deliverable, a format for such a certificate can be seen, confirming that the programme was awarded the label or the qualification. Since this attestation only pertains to the programme level and not the individual students within the programme, there is no issue with making the certificate downloadable from the website. The certificate should be available for downloading in any language of the European Union, allowing graduates to choose the version that best suits their needs or those of their employer.

## 5.4 Recommendations for Member States

### 5.4.1 Introduction of the European Degree

Acknowledging the possible types of awards outlined in this deliverable and considering the pros and cons of different solutions, **member states should make informed decisions on how they wish to introduce the European Degree** (label and subsequently qualification). Utilising this potentially powerful tool can transform their legal landscape concerning joint programmes. It is evident that in certain instances, transitional periods and exemptions will be necessary. The ED-AFFICHE Consortium recommends **maintaining a continuous dialogue with the European Commission and HEIs within the country**. This recommendation was underscored by participants in the Final Dissemination Event. Additionally, it will be crucial to ensure a transparent and stable flow of information regarding measures taken by different member states on the road towards the European Degree.



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### 5.4.2 Bologna follow-up group

The ED-AFFICHE Consortium encourages **member states to organise themselves within the Bologna follow-up group to coordinate actions related to the European Degree**, particularly regarding the use of a procedure aligned with the European Approach as a verification method.

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### 5.4.3 Support the QA procedures

Given that the European Approach and ESGs are mandatory criteria for the European Degree Label, it is imperative for all member states to ensure that their legislation incorporates the European Approach and that the procedures for QA agencies align with these criteria. The ED-AFFICHE project, through interviews with stakeholders, has highlighted a strong need for enhanced support towards QA agencies, promoting a lean and cost-effective implementation of the European Approach. Recognising that this procedure demands substantial resources, **member states should strategize for a sustainable approach, facilitating HEIs to utilise this procedure effectively**. This becomes especially crucial if the procedure evolves into an umbrella term encompassing various decisions made by a single QA agency, which are universally accepted and legally valid across all participating countries (e.g., joint degree accreditation, awarding of the label, and European Degree accreditation).

### 5.4.4 Funding

Following consultations with stakeholders possessing extensive experience in sustaining joint programmes, ED-AFFICHE asserts that **encouraging member states to offer scholarships and financial incentives for students engaging in these programmes is a valid recommendation**. Mandatory physical mobility increases study costs, but the European Student Association (ESN) has explicitly emphasised the importance and benefits of physical mobility, urging the exploration of funding opportunities at various levels to make these programmes accessible to a broader student population.

Secondly, the coordination of joint policies among several universities, the development of shared courses, and navigating accreditation procedures represent a time- and human resources-consuming process. Offering relatively small **financial support to launch these programmes would incentivise universities and especially academics to commit to this collaborative process**. Coupled with EU



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financial instruments, these incentives would enable more programmes and students to benefit from international education.

Thirdly, ED-AFFICHE has gathered evidence indicating that, for various reasons, **joint programmes are often excluded from national funding schemes**. Some countries do not allocate funding if the programmes are taught in another language, if a student is registered in more than one university, if a student starts their studies in a foreign university, or due to state-funded student quotas. Consequently, choosing to study a joint programme may cause students to forfeit financial incentives such as state-funded places, national scholarships, and tax exemptions that would be available for single-degree programmes.

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Furthermore, joint programme consortia face challenges in establishing unified tuition fees, given the differences in national policies. ED-AFFICHE encourages member states to address these issues in interministerial consultations and provide solutions to the consortia. Until the legal landscape for joint degrees becomes more adapted to this specific type of programme, ED-AFFICHE recommends that member states provide financial incentives to their HEIs embarking on this path, especially when multiple HEIs from different member states are involved. Without such financial stimuli, the initiative to create joint programmes with multiple HEIs could be hindered by legal and practical difficulties.

## 5.5 Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

### 5.5.1 Active and leading role

The ED-AFFICHE Consortium, based on extensive consultations with programme directors (refer to the [ED-AFFICHE Consolidated report on outcomes of European Degree criteria mapping exercise](#)), underscores the **crucial role of HEIs in actively participating in ongoing negotiations regarding the European Degree within their respective countries**. This dialogue initiated in numerous countries through pilot projects is expected to gain momentum as the European Commission intensifies its communication on the matter with member states. Responsible ministries will seek informed feedback from HEIs in their countries to report back to the European Commission. The successful implementation at the national level will require striking a balance between the EC's recommendations, the legal framework of the country in question, and the preferences and needs of HEIs in that particular region.



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Taking an active role in this process is therefore essential to ensure that the voice of HEIs is not overlooked.

### 5.5.2 Strategy for joint programmes

We recommend that HEIs develop a **comprehensive strategy that clearly defines the place of transnational joint programmes within their educational portfolio**. Ideally, this strategy should be centrally developed and adopted to reflect the intended role of joint programmes in the medium to long term. Such a document can establish priorities, including the types of joint programmes to be developed, the scholarly fields they should cover, preferred partners, the types of degrees they should aim to confer, the proportion seeking external funding, the target number of students, and other considerations. This strategic framework can serve as a foundation for making informed medium- and short-term decisions related to transnational joint programmes.

### 5.5.3 Institutional procedures curated for joint programmes

HEIs must incorporate the concept of joint programmes into their internal classifiers and **adapt existing institutional regulations and procedures to reflect the needs and particularities of transnational joint programmes**. Typically, HEIs establish regulations covering a wide range of issues related to standard domestic study programmes – from admission procedures to enrolment, quality assurance procedures, teaching, examination, accreditation, tuition and fees, data storage, diploma and diploma supplement forms, and more. If these regulations lack sections specifically tailored to accommodate the needs and purposes of education designed in a transnational environment, the practice of conducting joint programmes may become overly complicated.

Amendments and possible exemptions should be introduced in a manner that clarifies they do not compromise the quality of education but rather provide necessary flexibility when designing a study programme that must satisfy multiple sources of regulation. This implies that institutional regulations applicable to joint programmes should be sufficiently streamlined to avoid reintroducing obstacles that had been removed by the legislator. Additionally, they should not contribute to the complexity of adhering to multiple national/regional legislations already applicable to the programme.



#### 5.5.4 Supporting IT background

**Dedicating appropriate attention to the development and updates of IT tools and services is of high importance.** The processes associated with the life cycle of students in higher education typically span several fields – from the verification of previous education, admission, registration, and enrolment to the history of exams taken, mobility tracking, and the creation of diplomas and diploma supplements, along with reporting to national databases. All these processes require a functioning IT environment to operate smoothly, and in the case of joint programmes, they must account for students who spend a significant portion of their studies (undergoing these processes) abroad.

Concerning joint programmes themselves, the situation becomes more complex and demanding, as they are not realized by any singular HEI but by a collective of them. Consequently, the registration of affiliated accreditation, curricula, and their integration into the IT infrastructure of any HEI can introduce additional complications. Specific components of the joint programme are implemented across partner institutions, which are jointly responsible for the overall success of the process. When both aspects are combined (student-centered IT processes and the transnational nature of the joint programme), IT tools that are not adapted to the added complexity can cause various problems in data tracking, reporting, and exporting.

#### 5.5.5 Practical support for joint programmes

The establishment of a **dedicated support network within HEIs for joint programmes is of paramount importance.** While not mandatory, this layer serves as a central repository for crucial materials, including guidelines, templates, good practice examples, FAQ sections, recommendations, and clusters of contacts. Such resources are invaluable for inexperienced users, playing a pivotal role in increasing engagement within the academic community. For instance, boosting the number of joint programme directors or proposals for external funding relies heavily on the support provided by this network. Its significance cannot be overstated, especially when aiming to enhance academic involvement in transnational joint programmes.

Simultaneously, implementing or reinforcing **internal funding instruments** tailored to compensate faculties and departments for their participation, coordination, or realisation of transnational joint



programmes is crucial. These initiatives involve additional workload due to their transnational dimension, including travel, information sharing, decision-making, dispute resolution, and technical implementation. Internal funding schemes that acknowledge and reflect these demands serve as vital motivators, incentivising increased engagement and seamless execution of transnational joint programmes. This prevents situations where, despite diplomatic support for internationalisation, economic policies fail to align correspondingly. Page | 56

Furthermore, dedicating **Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) positions to support the emergence of joint programmes** is vital. The intricate process of design, implementation, and practice demands expertise in various interconnected fields, spanning curricula design, accreditation procedures, quality assurance, funding models, international relations, project proposal writing, project implementation, and reporting. Trained personnel specialising in these areas significantly alleviate the additional workload, allowing program directors and academic staff to dedicate more time to teaching and research.

Consultations with joint programme directors and coordinators underscore the importance of incentivising university staff participation in joint programmes. **Recognition for both career advancement and financial compensation for academic and administrative personnel involved is recommended.** Adequate acknowledgment of teaching activities performed abroad is essential, ensuring that teachers can contribute to internationalisation efforts without encountering institutional barriers. This approach fosters a supportive environment, encouraging sustained engagement in joint programmes within HEIs.

### 5.5.6 Alignment with European framework

Since transnational education occurs on a stage that transcends national level, it is highly recommend for any HEI in EHEA interested in facilitating these activities **to adopt the tools connected to the Bologna process.** Any singular definition of key notions and concepts (“joint programme”, “joint degree”, “double degree”, “dual degree”, “European degree/label”) or standards (Cf. [B. Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA - EQAR](#)) can create the risk of collision with the definitions and standards adopted on more central level by EU’s and EHEA’s bodies. **Compatibility of the most basic principles and their definitions across the spectrum of different member states proved again and again as a critical point for any future development.**



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## 5.6 Conclusions

The success of the European Degree, whether as a label or qualification, relies on a coordinated effort among major stakeholders, including the European Commission, member states, quality assurance agencies, and Higher Education Institutions. In this collaborative endeavour, it is crucial to involve employers and students, the ultimate end-users of the European Degree, through consultation processes, ensuring they have a clear understanding of the value associated with the European Degree, both as a label and as a qualification.

Several **key considerations** are integral to the success of the European Degree rollout:

1. **Embedded Processes:** The European Degree verification and awarding processes should be seamlessly integrated into established processes and Bologna tools, particularly the European Approach, with clearly defined responsibilities.
2. **Legal Frameworks:** National/regional legal frameworks must undergo revision to enable compliance with European Degree Label criteria, facilitating a harmonised and standardised approach across member states.
3. **Consultation:** Employers and students should be actively consulted throughout the process to gather insights and perspectives, ensuring that the European Degree aligns with their expectations and needs.
4. **Financial Instruments:** Financial instruments should be strategically attached to the European Degree, incentivising programmes to apply for it and enabling students to benefit from joint programmes.

These key aspects were initially outlined in the joint position on the European Degree presented by ED-AFFICHE represented European University alliances in 2022. Subsequently, these considerations have been affirmed through extensive consultation with all relevant stakeholders, providing a comprehensive and validated foundation for the successful implementation of the European Degree initiative.





## Annexes

[Annex 9 – Joint Position Paper on the European Degree](#)

[Annex 10 - Additional Feedback received after presenting ED-AFFICHE Recommendations on 5 March 2024](#)

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Annex 11 – ED-AFFICHE Designs for European Degree Label and European Degree



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