

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN  
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL  
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

# **A BLUEPRINT FOR A EUROPEAN DEGREE**





# 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamental for the future of the EU. It is a foundation for personal fulfilment, employability, achievement and for an active, responsible citizenship. Through delivering high-quality education, universities<sup>1</sup> are beacons of our European way of life. This includes the promotion of academic values and excellence and of democratic practices and fundamental rights, as well as fostering equality, diversity and inclusion.

Europe's competitiveness and prosperity depend on the future-proof skills of the current and next generations to accelerate and master the green and digital transitions, compensate the demographic trends and to ensure Europe's open strategic autonomy in key areas. Education is also key for the economic and social development and the resilience of countries that aspire to join the EU. **We need to be prepared to lead this change and shape the future.**

As the key challenges of our time become increasingly global, and as Europe need to strengthen its open strategic autonomy, **transnational education** is no longer a 'nice-to-have' option but becomes a necessity. It is a condition for equipping future generations with the competences and skills that European societies will need to thrive in an ever more interconnected world.

The EU is competing with other education areas in the world. Its capacity to attract the best talent depends, in part, on the degrees that its higher education institutions can offer. That is why many universities in Europe seek to **pool expertise and to combine complementary strengths** not available at any single institution, **to provide graduates and lifelong learners with strategic skills for their future.**

Since the launch of the European Education Area in 2020, remarkable progress has been made. Transnational cooperation has been a driving force

behind reforms to facilitate and support the **emergence of innovative models like the soon-to-be 60 European Universities alliances<sup>2</sup>**, involving around 500 higher education institutions from all parts of Europe, from capitals to rural areas. They act as **trailblazers for the entire higher education sector.**

University cooperation across borders can develop in many different ways. The most ambitious forms of the provision of joint education between countries, are programmes that lead to a joint degree. However, significant legal and administrative obstacles continue to make these degrees difficult to deliver. This is **holding back the necessary transformation in Europe's higher education sector. The European strategy for universities<sup>3</sup>**, adopted in 2022, set out ambitious actions to achieve a European Education Area in higher education, with the intention to develop a European degree. This communication puts this intention into action by providing a clear blueprint for a European degree to become a reality.

The **European degree**, a new **type of qualification to be enshrined in national legislation**, would make it easier for universities from different countries to cooperate seamlessly and develop innovative joint programmes leading to a joint degree, in **full respect of their institutional autonomy and of the competences of Member State or regional governments.** Such a European degree would also contribute to building **a common European identity and a stronger European sense of belonging.**

It would be based on commonly agreed European criteria reflecting the relevance of the learning experience, the commitment to common values and the excellence of the cooperation arrangements between universities. It

would further advance a shared understanding of the EU's needs in terms of academic and skills requirements, along the lines of the European strategy for universities. It could become a trigger to review and to address existing disparities that currently limit universities' ability to cooperate in Europe.

The European degree would encompass **collaborative efforts, interdisciplinary approaches, and international perspectives**, all of which underline Europe's readiness to support and develop a more highly-skilled, adaptable, and globally competitive European workforce. Joint educational programmes leading to a European degree would have the potential to attract students from around the world and to help find the necessary talents for our economy, which is particularly pertinent in critical technology areas crucial for our competitiveness and technological sovereignty. At the same time, offering a European degree would also boost learning mobility within the EU, address the needs of regions facing a talent development trap<sup>4</sup>, and help meet the labour market demand for European- and globally-minded graduates.

## 2. A EUROPEAN DEGREE: A KEY ELEMENT TO ACHIEVE THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA AND TO BOOST EUROPE'S COMPETITIVENESS AND ATTRACTIVENESS

A European degree would serve as a strategic instrument to achieve the **European Education Area**, a common and inclusive space for quality education and learning mobility across borders for all, with closely

**This Communication, together with two proposals for Council recommendations**, one on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, and another one on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education, **is a large step towards achieving the European Education Area.**

While the proposals for both Council recommendations go beyond the ambition of developing a European degree and are relevant for all types of higher education institutions and the education that they provide, they are closely interlinked. A quality assurance and recognition system is key to building trust in joint educational programmes. Highly skilled and motivated academic professionals are essential to providing high-quality teaching and research in our universities. Joint programmes are often not considered part of the core activities of academic staff and therefore can be an additional burden, hence the need for additional recognition and incentives.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'university' is used as a reference to the broader sector, representing the entire area of tertiary education, thus including all types of higher education institutions, including research universities, university colleges, universities of applied sciences, higher vocational education and training institutions, and higher arts institutions.

<sup>2</sup> [European Universities initiative.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities, 18 January 2022, COM\(2022\) 16 final.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Inforegio - Harnessing talent in Europe's regions \(europea.eu\)](#)



**2.1. Increased employability and skills relevance**

**Employers, including multinational companies and SMEs**, seek individuals with a blend of transversal skills (cultural intelligence, critical-thinking, problem-solving skills, creativity, and adaptability) – **all of which are skills expected to be in demand to achieve the EU's green transition targets according to the 2023 OECD Skills Outlook**. Boosting the capacity of higher education institutions to equip more people with these skills would help to meet this demand.

The European degree would support the creation of more joint programmes that reflect the demands of a knowledge-based economy. The underlying commonly agreed European criteria would strive to increase employability of graduates by equipping them with future-proof competences and skills that are particularly sought by employers.

Evidence from studies and surveys gathered in the accompanying staff working document shows that graduates from transnational joint programmes report the greatest impact on their careers and intercultural experiences from improved employment-related skills (such as language, critical thinking, sector- or field-specific, communication, analytical and problem-solving skills) and improved personal and intercultural abilities, including openness to new challenges, tolerance, confidence, and greater awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses.

This blend of transversal and sector-specific skills and competences **increases students' employability on a European scale. A European degree would make graduates more attractive for future employers. It would be synonymous with high-quality programmes that prepare European- and globally-minded, highly skilled individuals.**

**IN BRIEF:**

The European degree would support the creation of labour-market relevant joint programmes. The key competences associated with a European degree would position graduates as sought-after professionals in the European and global job market where they would stand out as highly qualified with a combination of problem-solving prowess, adaptability, multilingual skills, multicultural awareness, and interdisciplinary expertise that aligns seamlessly with the changing demands of the global workforce.

**2.2. Cutting red tape for increased transparency and visibility of higher education systems**

Many universities that wish to deepen transnational cooperation **struggle with discrepancies in national legislation**. This takes up resources and distracts from their actual work. By simplifying the work for universities, we can deploy precious resources for the benefit of teaching and research.

In a Eurobarometer survey of 2018, 92% of universities identified the elimination of legal and administrative obstacles to international strategic institutional partnerships as a key issue that would boost transnational cooperation<sup>5</sup>.

Despite 25 years of cooperation within the intergovernmental Bologna process, and the

development of several tools to improve the transparency of national higher education systems, the quality assurance of educational offers and recognition of degrees, significant challenges remain. Progress within the European Higher Education Area has been hampered by differing levels of implementation between and within countries. The EU needs to move further and faster to allow its universities to cooperate smoothly and efficiently.

In a recent study<sup>6</sup>, 92% of surveyed national and regional authorities responded that a European degree could improve the implementation of the existing Bologna tools, 84% say that it would improve the global reputation of European higher education, and 88% say that it would help to facilitate cooperation between national authorities on educational policies.

<sup>5</sup> Eurobarometer survey 2018.

<sup>6</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.

Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects<sup>7</sup> conducted with 140 higher education institutions shows that a European degree could simplify processes and cut red tape in creating joint degree programmes with a clear and common pathway ensuring that all types of universities in Europe can work efficiently together.

**IN BRIEF:**

The European degree is a way to simplify processes and cut red tape in creating joint degree programmes, ensuring that universities in Europe can efficiently work together. In turn, this will support the development of more joint programmes benefiting a greater number of students.

**2.3. A driver for strategic cooperation, global competitiveness, and attractiveness**

The European degree will enable universities to forge **deeper cooperation with partners** more quickly and simply, which will **increase their performance and excellence for global attractiveness and competitiveness**.

The U-Multirank's Higher Education Cooperation Index<sup>8</sup> shows that higher education institutions that work together with other institutions, businesses, industry, governments, regional bodies, and across borders, perform better than those that are less focused on cooperation. As more and more universities prioritise collaboration, working together within the EU would be expected to be the easiest option. Currently, some universities report that it can be easier to set-up joint degree programmes with non-EU partners.

The pace of technological progress continues to accelerate, cutting across traditional boundaries between subjects and disciplines. Working across subjects with an interdisciplinary approach can bring about new insights, offer new solutions to the challenges of a complex world, and lead to the development of new skills. One key feature of the European degree would be to better reap the benefits of interdisciplinary cooperation, based on the most innovative learning and research approach

in modern higher education. A European degree, based on this approach, would strengthen Europe's innovation capacity and, in the long run, its global competitiveness.

**IN BRIEF:**

The European degree would encourage the creation of many more joint degree programmes that are competitive and attractive globally, both for European and third-country nationals, including EU candidate countries, and that equip Europe with the talents and skills it needs to thrive, innovate and grow.

**3. A EUROPEAN DEGREE: KEY PARAMETERS AND ADDED VALUE****3.1. What would a European degree be?**

A European degree would be:

- **delivered as a joint degree at national, regional, or institutional level, like any other degree**, in full respect of the principles of subsidiarity, institutional autonomy and academic freedom.
- **awarded on a voluntary basis by universities working together across the EU**, attesting to learning outcomes achieved as part of **transnational programmes**.
- based on a set of **common criteria<sup>9</sup> agreed at European level** and applied to the joint degree programme. These European criteria would reflect a common understanding and specific needs to equip Europe's workforce with relevant competences and skills to boost its innovation capacity, notably in the face of the twin transitions. The accessibility and attractiveness to students from all backgrounds, including those with fewer opportunities, would be promoted through the inclusiveness criteria.
- **enabled by** relevant national higher education legislation **supported by national qualifications**

<sup>7</sup> Joint European degree label and a legal status for European universities alliances; <sup>10</sup> Erasmus+ projects to put them in place.

<sup>8</sup> U-Multirank. The indicators used are strategic partnerships, international joint degrees, internships, international co-publications, co-publications with industrial partners, regional co-publications, and co-patents with industry.

<sup>9</sup> A set of criteria were developed with Member States and higher education stakeholders in 2022. They were tested by six Erasmus+ pilot experimentation projects between April 2023 and March 2024. The pilots proposed changes to the criteria resulting in the list set out in Annex 2 of the proposal for a Council recommendation on quality assurance and recognition.



**frameworks<sup>10</sup>** to allow institutions to accredit and deliver such degrees, alongside other national degrees, at **Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral** levels.

- **delivered preferably in a digital format<sup>11</sup>.**
- **automatically recognised<sup>12</sup>** across the EU.

## WHAT A EUROPEAN DEGREE WOULD BE:

- A new type of degree awarded after transnational Bachelor, Master, or Doctoral programmes delivered at national, regional, or institutional level
- Automatically recognised everywhere in the EU
- Awarded jointly and on a voluntary basis by a group of universities across Europe in full respect of subsidiarity, institutional autonomy, and academic freedom
- Based on a common set of criteria agreed at European level

### 3.2. One European degree, many benefits

Numerous benefits and opportunities associated with the creation of a European degree have been identified through **research, 40 rounds of stakeholder consultation, a call for evidence, and the preliminary findings from ongoing Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects.**

The findings highlight a considerable enthusiasm from universities for a pathway to greater simplification and improved strategic partnership. Students call for joint programmes to be more widely available. Employers express a keen interest in a visible and easy-to-understand instrument that effectively equips future workers with highly valued workplace competences.

A **European degree** would have the following benefits:



#### For students:

Students would be at the heart of the European degree, which would give them the opportunity to be part of various academic communities, contributing to a more diverse and interconnected European Education Area. In a recent survey<sup>13</sup>, 9 out of 10 students identified the following as the main potential benefits of a European degree:

- create more opportunities to study in several European countries, with automatic credit recognition;
- facilitate the offering of innovative joint study programmes and a seamless academic experience across campuses; and
- skills and competences acquisition leading to higher employability worldwide.



#### For employers and the labour market:

Employers and businesses highly appreciate the concept of a European degree, which would signify a specific set of valued transversal competences. From their perspective, a European degree would lead to:

- easier recruitment with increased transparency and clarity thanks to a European degree that is easy to read and understand, as compared to multiple degrees for the same study programme;
- increased attractiveness of Europe as a destination for talented students to be equipped with relevant skills for the European labour market; and
- increased possibilities to work with universities e.g. by participating in curricula design.



#### For academic staff:

A European degree would not only shape the academic journey for students but also the landscape for academics and university staff and would empower academics to navigate the complexities of a globalised academic landscape. Analysis by the European Tertiary Education Register of 1,500 universities shows that internationalisation of academic staff is uneven across types of institution and countries.

For academic staff, a European degree would bring:

- more opportunities for mobility, to test new pedagogies and attractive teaching experiences;
- fewer bureaucratic hurdles, enabling academics to focus on the content and quality of cooperation rather than on its administration; and
- knowledge transfer and skill enhancement, promoting a culture of continuous learning and professional development through transnational cooperation.



#### For universities:

Universities are calling for simpler ways to work together. By providing flexibility and maintaining quality standards, enabling a common and simplified framework to build new cooperation, a European degree would enable universities to:

- pool resources to offer opportunities they could not offer alone;
- remove unnecessary barriers to setting up a degree programme with several universities;
- embed learning periods abroad in the curricula; and
- ensure automatic recognition across the EU of these qualifications.



#### For the European Union and its Member States:

Higher education institutions are instrumental in building connections within Europe and with the world and in promoting European values and way of life globally. Enabling the creation of more joint degree programmes would help to attract and retain more talent in Europe, and in European regions in talent development traps, while supporting cooperation with universities and systems all over the world. A European degree would:

- reinforce a sense of European identity and belonging;
- strengthen the global competitiveness and reputation of European higher education systems, enabling them to build more competitive joint educational offers, further attracting talent from non-EU countries;
- foster balanced student and talent mobility within the EU and beyond; and
- – foster a European spirit of cooperation in the European Education Area.



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<sup>10</sup> **National Qualifications Frameworks** (NQF) means an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims at integrating and coordinating national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.

<sup>11</sup> The digital format should be secure and compatible with the European Learning Model as multilingual data model in the field of learning.

<sup>12</sup> **Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad** (OJ C 444, 10.12.2018, p. 1).

<sup>13</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.**



## 4. BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS FOR A EUROPEAN DEGREE – THE OBSTACLES TO OVERCOME

### 4.1. A wealth of empirical evidence

There are still too many hurdles along the path to seamless and deeper transnational cooperation in the European Education Area, such as discussed in the following section. The evidence for this emerged from more than 3 years of consultations with higher education stakeholders, and especially from the universities engaged in deep transnational cooperation, such as European Universities alliances or Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters programmes. They are calling for solutions to overcome the complexities they face.

Many of these obstacles had already been identified in the context of the 2022 Council Recommendation on building bridges for efficient higher education cooperation<sup>14</sup>. Renewed efforts are essential to make progress on the implementation of this Council Recommendation. In addition, further obstacles continue to be identified.

This highlights the need to equip the EU with a European degree as a dedicated and enabling framework to overcome obstacles.

The Erasmus+ programme<sup>15</sup> has been supporting policy experimentation projects involving more than 140 universities and 60 national and regional authorities in charge of accreditation, quality assurance and regulation of higher education from all Member States, from businesses, and students' representatives. Together, they mapped more than 1,000 joint programmes and used this wealth of knowledge and expertise to explore the concept of a European degree as a label, and as a degree.

Through interviews, surveys of thousands of students and practitioners, focus groups, workshops and

consultations, the projects carried out a bottom-up reflection on the added value a European degree could provide. They also considered the criteria that would best fulfil its nature and identified the main obstacles preventing joint programmes from reaching their full potential. These obstacles can be clustered as follows.

### 4.2. Divergent and complex legislation and regulations highlighted by the Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects

National education and training systems and corresponding national legislation and regulations have largely developed independently, without considering transnational cooperation options. This leads to **disparities that prevent universities** from delivering transnational joint programmes and joint degrees altogether or make it very cumbersome.

These obstacles include the following:

- **Specific national rules on the form of final exams, grading scales and workloads** applied to joint programmes prevent universities from offering truly transnational and integrated joint degree programmes and impose artificial additional requirements on students.
- **Limitations to multilingualism in joint degree programmes.** With today's increasing learning mobility, transnational cooperation models for joint programmes would be facilitated by taking account of and addressing the need to remove barriers to the use of multiple languages in the interests of students, institutions, and the labour market.
- **Prescriptive rules on physical presence** with minimum or maximum durations imposed. These reflect the world before European integration and the digital transformation and negatively affect student

mobility, limiting the potential benefits of digital technologies for facilitating transnational learning opportunities.

- **Lack of recognition of blended/online learning** prevents the full use of the potential of digital tools in education, including taking into consideration the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities, their staff, and students need to be able to benefit fully from the digital transformation.
- **Limits on the participation of teaching staff** from partner universities applied to transnational joint programmes artificially restrict a university's access to experienced staff and puts a cap on its performance.

These obstacles pose challenges for **any transnational partnership**. Many of them run counter to the idea of a European Education Area, in which learners can move freely and have seamless access to high quality inclusive higher education.

**The award and delivery of degrees and diplomas** to students are also subject to restrictive regulations, making this very complex. These include restrictions on language, authorised signatures, signature formats (digital or physical), approved logos, and specific paper requirements (e.g. dimensions, thickness, designated printing locations). The **process of awarding a joint degree to a student can take years**, if it is possible.

Preliminary outcomes from the Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects clearly demonstrate that a European degree could be a way to overcome these obstacles.

### 4.3. Uneven and slow implementation of the Bologna process tools

The intergovernmental Bologna process, initiated in

1999 outside the EU framework, seeks to bring more consistency to higher education systems across 49 countries, including the 27 EU countries. It established the European Higher Education Area to facilitate student and staff mobility, to make higher education more inclusive and accessible, and to make it more attractive and competitive worldwide. The Bologna process is key to building the necessary trust for successful learning mobility, cross-border academic cooperation and the mutual recognition of study periods and qualifications earned abroad.

While the Bologna process emphasises the importance of joint degrees, progress has been slow, partly due to its wide geographic scope and the diversity of systems, traditions, political and economic contexts it encompasses. As a result, not all Member States have implemented the necessary reforms, leading to inefficiencies in cooperation among the 49 countries.

Despite the creation of the European approach for quality assurance of joint programmes – a pan-European instrument which allows for once-only evaluation of joint programmes – only a few programmes have made use of this instrument in the past 9 years.

Some Bologna instruments, particularly in relation to quality assurance and recognition, have not produced the intended results yet. Within the EU, established mechanisms for decision-making and implementation of transnational cooperation can further facilitate the realisation of a European Education Area, with effective solutions allowing universities to cooperate efficiently with the help of trusted and highly valued degrees.

<sup>14</sup> Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation (OJ C 160, 13.4.2022, p. 1).

<sup>15</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport (OJ L 189, 28.5.2021, p. 1).



#### 4.4. Quality assurance and recognition systems in higher education should be further improved

Any programme, joint or otherwise, needs to be accredited through a robust quality assurance process in order to deliver a degree. This is important to ensure the necessary trust in the quality of provision.

Many higher education institutions in Europe indicate that quality assurance processes for transnational programmes are too long and costly. The more universities from different countries are involved in a joint programme, the more complex is the process. It can sometime take up to 2 years to obtain accreditation. Lengthy procedures do not allow universities to adjust to changing realities and respond quickly to emerging political, economic or societal needs.

Recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad is not yet automatic in all countries, especially where the decision is taken at higher education institution level. This adds a considerable burden for university graduates and limits their capacity to move freely for learning and professional purposes.

In essence, while quality assurance is crucial to ensure trust in the education system, many of the disparities are outdated and unfit for purpose, creating unnecessary red tape.

#### 4.5. Disincentives for staff to engage in transnational cooperation and joint degrees

Developing a quality joint degree programme requires time and effort from academic staff. Pioneering new transnational projects requires dedicated staff with specific skills – and given the specific issues and obstacles, it tends to be a full-time job. However, experience with transnational programmes shows that there is a risk: transnational cooperation comes at a cost for the people who engage in it, as their work is not always recognised with the appreciation it deserves. In addition, staff require ongoing professional development to sustain the high quality of these transdisciplinary pedagogical programmes.

In a dedicated survey<sup>16</sup>, 66% of respondents from the higher education sector agreed that transnational cooperation is part of their higher education institutional strategy, but only 39% agree that career pathways for academic staff effectively enable, support and encourage transnational cooperation activities. This is in line with challenges identified by previous surveys, including the ‘amount of extra work on top of usual business’ (80% of respondents), and ‘getting and sustaining commitment of academic staff’ (72%).

## 5. HOW TO OVERCOME THOSE OBSTACLES – SPECIFIC STEPS TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN DEGREE

The European degree would provide an agile way to overcome these obstacles by equipping national higher education systems in the EU with the means to develop, assess and award joint degrees based on commonly agreed European criteria that transcend national or regional borders.

It would offer a comprehensive solution to improve the seamless and deeper transnational cooperation in the European Education Area and help address the EU's strategic skills shortages.

The two proposals for Council Recommendations which accompany this Communication will also ensure that a European degree can rely on fit-for-purpose quality assurance and recognition systems, with attractive career prospects for academics involved in it. At each step, the readiness and engagement of the Member States and, where relevant, of regional governments will determine its success.

#### 5.1. Making Europe a talent base for innovation and competitiveness

##### 5.1.1. Defining common European criteria for a European degree

Higher education institutions would be able to award the European degree based on an **assessment by the competent existing national structures** of whether the joint programme fulfils clearly **defined and commonly agreed European criteria**. The

content of these criteria would form the foundation of the European degree and would determine its level of ambition, setting out for what it stands and why it is different from degrees awarded in other parts of the world.

**The proposed European criteria are set out in Annex II to the proposal for a Council recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education.**

### THE PROPOSED CRITERIA FOR A EUROPEAN DEGREE ARE:

- excellence of transnational programme organisation and management: joint programmes are built on Bologna and EU tools and standards, are jointly designed and delivered, based on joint quality assurance arrangements.
- relevance of the learning experience: joint programmes are student-centred, embedding labour market relevant opportunities, interdisciplinarity components, student mobility and the acquisition of horizontal and digital skills.
- adherence to European values: joint programmes promote democracy, multilingualism, inclusiveness and environmental sustainability.

They aim at fostering the development of more joint programmes in line with the vision set out in the European strategy for universities, in particular when it comes to enabling the development of learners as creative and critical thinkers, problem solvers, active and responsible citizens, engaged as actors of change in their community to positively impact the society around them.

By setting **demanding standards**, the European criteria underpin the excellence of transnational cooperation between institutions, the provision of a transnational learning experience, student-centred teaching and learning (including some provision of interdisciplinarity, mobility and student-centred approaches), the relevance to the labour market and to societal needs (cooperation with businesses, public sector and civil society, provision of transversal, green and digital skills), and the respect for common values (multilingualism, inclusiveness, democratic values). As there is no one-size-fits-all solution, the European criteria are flexible enough for the European degree

to be **accessible to all types of universities, all fields and disciplines** and **at all levels**, respecting the diversity of academic traditions and systems.

The proposed European criteria **build on the use of existing tools** developed in the EU and the Bologna process and ensure that the European degree meets the highest standards in higher education cooperation. They offer a framework for universities to work together to address strategic skills shortages on the European labour market. They respect **subsidiarity, institutional autonomy and academic freedom**.

As Europe has a diverse higher education landscape, with different historic backgrounds and traditions, bringing about a common understanding of the essence of a European degree requires common reflection and a collective effort.

This reflection process started just after the adoption of the Council conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe in April 2022<sup>17</sup>. Preliminary draft criteria

<sup>16</sup> See results in the accompanying Staff Working Document SWD(2024) 74.

<sup>17</sup> Council conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe (OJ C 167, 21.4.2022, p. 9).



have been co-developed with national and regional authorities, higher education institutions, accreditation and quality assurance agencies, students' organisations, and representatives from the public and private sectors. Once defined, they were **tested** by 6 Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects. The testing involved more than **140 higher education institutions across all Member States**, 60 national and regional authorities **involving 17 ministries and 20 national quality assurance agencies, students' organisations and economic and social partners**. As a result, the **pilots proposed a revision of the criteria**. The **proposed European criteria** as set out in Annex II to the proposal for a Council recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education **are the results of this revision**.

As a next step, **the Council of the EU is expected to take forward this proposal**.

**The tested criteria will be the basis for thorough discussions and dialogue with Member States, the higher education sector, economic and social partners to move forward on the**

**next steps with the creation of a European degree and provide further guidance on their implementation.**

## ACTIONS:

The Commission invites the Council of the EU to take forward the proposal for a Council recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, including Annex II, which sets out the European criteria for a European degree.

The Commission will support the dialogue with Member States, the higher education sector, economic and social partners, to move forward on the next steps with the creation of a European degree and to accompany a collaborative process with Member States and stakeholders on its implementation.

### 5.1.2. Member States to choose their entry level into the pathway towards a European degree

Given Member States' respective starting points, views, and traditions, which will inevitably differ, the development of the European degree cannot happen overnight. It also cannot be achieved based on a one-size-fits-all approach.

This Communication sets out a gradual approach and ultimate level of ambition for Member States who opt to embark on the pathway towards the European degree. This approach embraces the diversity among Member States and their higher education institutions, allowing them to proceed towards the European degree at their own pace. Member States could move forward, step-by-step, towards a commonly defined goal with two entry-points: a **European degree** and a **preparatory European label indicating that the European criteria have been met**.



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Any consortium of higher education institutions would be able, if they so wish, to find the right starting point and move towards an increasingly integrated path over time.

Two different entry points could be used on the path towards a European degree:

### ENTRY POINT: A PREPARATORY EUROPEAN LABEL

Joint degree programmes meeting the European criteria may receive a European label from the competent authorities in charge of accreditation and/or quality assurance of higher education programmes (self-accrediting universities, accreditation agencies, quality assurance agencies). While **the label will provide a powerful branding tool**, it will not solve the obstacles encountered by universities to establish and run joint degree programmes. This path would be open to universities after adopting the proposed European criteria and developing guidance to implement these.

### ENTRY POINT: A EUROPEAN DEGREE

A degree would be awarded jointly by several universities from different countries (e.g. a European University alliance). The European degree would be integrated into national legislation as a new type of qualification. This would offer a significant simplification for universities and students by removing disparities between national rules and provides EU universities with a common and clear framework for creating joint degree programmes. As with any degree, the European degree would be accredited in accordance with national legislation and national qualifications frameworks by the competent authorities at institutional, regional, or national level.

A European degree could also be awarded by a legal entity established by several universities from different countries (e.g. a European University alliance with a legal status). Some alliances of universities have already set up such legal entities, and are exploring the use of existing European legal tools like the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). This path would possibly be the simplest and most efficient for universities, in terms of associated costs and required resources.

## HOW TO GET THERE: STEPS TOWARDS A EUROPEAN DEGREE

1

27 March 2024 The Commission proposes **European criteria** co-developed with the higher education sector **as a basis for the European degree, for adoption by the Council of the EU**

2

Development of **implementation guidelines** towards a European degree by a **European degree Policy Lab**

3

**Member States to choose their entry level into the pathway towards a European degree** and work towards integrating the European degree in their national or regional legislation as a new type of qualification



A **preparatory European label certificate** is given to students of joint degree programmes meeting the European criteria, together with their national or regional degree



The **European degree** is awarded to students as a qualification following a transnational education experience either jointly by a group of universities across Europe or by a possible European legal entity established by several universities from different countries



**5.1.3. Fit-for-purpose quality assurance systems**

Quality assurance systems are necessary conditions for accountability and to improve universities' performances. They build the foundation for trust in the quality of higher education that is delivered to students. A European degree, more than any other type of degree, would depend on mutual trust and credible quality assurance systems. That is why building fit-for-purpose quality assurance systems is a pre-condition for delivering a European degree, while also having benefits for all programmes, including those leading to micro-credentials, and further enabling automatic recognition of qualifications. For this, Member States would need to:

- build stronger, more effective, and simpler quality assurance processes for all types of programmes;
- set-up a new European framework for an external multi-institutional-based approach to quality assurance that allows sustainable alliances of higher education institutions to self-accredit their joint degree programmes and joint micro-credentials,

building on the outcomes of Erasmus+ QA fit<sup>18</sup> and IMINQA projects<sup>19</sup>, and

- use suitable quality assurance processes to accompany higher education institutions in the implementation of automatic recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad.

**ACTIONS:**

The Commission proposes, together with this Communication, a **Council recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education. The Commission invites the Council of the EU to take forward the proposal and plans to support its future implementation** through targeted actions detailed in point 5.2.4.

**5.1.4. More attractive academic careers in higher education**

In the global knowledge economy, Europe's future will be shaped by the performance of its education systems and competitiveness in the global race for talent. Delivering on this ambitious vision of a European degree will depend on excellent academics to teach and equip graduates with the right skills. We will not be able to build excellent transnational programmes without providing incentives for excellent people to engage in this endeavour. That is why making academic careers in higher education more attractive is a key enabling factor for a European degree. For this, Member States would need to:

- better promote, recognise, and value the work of academics building deep transnational cooperation, such as developing joint degree programmes;
- better promote, recognise, and value diverse academic roles and tasks, including innovative and effective teaching; and

- promote competitive, safe, fair and non-discriminatory working conditions to attract and retain staff.

**ACTIONS:**

The Commission proposes, together with this Communication, a **Council recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education**, which is complementary to the Council Recommendation on establishing a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talents in Europe<sup>20</sup>. **The Commission invites the Council of the EU to take forward the proposal and plans to support its future implementation** through targeted actions detailed in point 5.2.5.

<sup>18</sup> Quality Assurance Fit for the Future (QA-FIT).

<sup>19</sup> Implementation and Innovation in Quality Assurance through peer learning (IMINQA).

<sup>20</sup> Council Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe (OJ C, C/2023/1640, 29.12.2023).

**5.2. The Commission will act as a facilitator and supporter**

Building on a wide empirical evidence base, the aim of this Communication is to provide a vision on possible ways forward to make the European degree a reality. It also seeks to feed **an open dialogue with the Member States**, higher education stakeholders, and economic and social partners on the next steps forward. The Commission will facilitate and support Member States with the following actions.

**5.2.1. Facilitate a dialogue on the results and recommendations of the Erasmus+ policy experimentations on a European degree label and legal status for alliances of higher education institutions**

The **Commission** will publish a **report** in autumn 2024 on the final outcomes of the Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects.

Following this, in 2025, it plans to set up a **'European degree policy lab'**. A series of dedicated in-depth

discussions and focused sessions would be launched, involving experts from Member States, higher education institutions, quality assurance/accreditation agencies, student representatives, and economic and social partners, with the aim of accelerating action and any necessary national reforms, and developing implementation guidelines and action plans. Its goal would be to foster peer learning and provide guidance on moving towards a European degree.

**ACTIONS:**

The Commission plans to foster cooperation through a **European degree policy lab** supported by Erasmus+, to be set up in 2025, to engage Member States and the wider higher education community to develop and implement guidelines towards a European degree.

**5.2.2. European funding incentives**

The **Erasmus+** programme will continue to offer support to European Universities alliances, Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, Marie Skłodowska-Curie (MSCA) Joint Doctoral Programmes, and European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT)-labelled programmes that act as trailblazers to implement European degrees. In addition, Erasmus+ will support the design and take up of European degrees through **dedicated support**, building on the successful example of the Erasmus Mundus Design Measures.

In 2025, the Commission plans to launch **'European degree pathway projects'** as part of the forward-looking cooperation projects action within Erasmus+. This will provide **financial incentives** for Member States, together with their accreditation and quality assurance agencies, universities, students, economic and social partners, to engage in the pathway towards a European degree.

- The **Technical Support Instrument**<sup>21</sup> may also provide technical expertise to design and implement the necessary reforms with guidance and support

to improve legal and administrative frameworks, foster cooperation between universities, research and businesses, improve quality assurance mechanisms and the attractiveness of careers in higher education.

**ACTIONS:**

The Commission plans to make European funding incentives available, as of 2025, through programmes like Erasmus+, to support the creation of European degrees. The Commission also plans to launch 'European degree Pathway Projects' to incentivise the engagement of all actors.

The Commission invites universities and the higher education community to make the best use of EU funding opportunities, such as from Erasmus+ or Digital Europe programmes, to support universities and staff to start designing and offering European degrees in full cooperation with national and regional authorities, and economic and social partners.

<sup>21</sup> Technical Support Instrument.



### 5.2.3. Support and accelerate the implementation of the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation

The full uptake of the Council Recommendation on *building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation*, adopted in April 2022, would considerably facilitate the path towards a European degree. The **report** on its implementation, to be published by mid-2024, and of which a summary is provided in the accompanying staff working document, shows the diversity of the European higher education landscape in terms of measures enabling deeper transnational cooperation, with uneven progress in this field. While some Member States seem to implement the different principles of the Recommendation, and have already started to carry out reforms, other countries report slower progress.

Based on the outcomes of the report, the Commission is proposing to organise **a series of peer learning activities** between Member States from autumn 2024

to deepen the discussion on tackling administrative obstacles in order to accelerate progress on implementing the Recommendation.

## ACTIONS:

The Commission will support the uptake of Council Recommendations, including the one on **building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation**. Peer learning activities can be organised, from autumn 2024, to tackle remaining obstacles.

The Commission invites Member States to consider **the current and future Council recommendations in the field of higher education** to continue removing obstacles to transnational cooperation and to pave the way for a European degree.

### 5.2.4. Support the implementation of the future Council recommendation on Quality Assurance and recognition

Making a European degree a reality requires a voluntary approach that offers all higher education systems a way to embark on this journey, whatever their own starting point. It also requires active involvement of students and institutional leaders to create a conducive environment for universities to establish European degrees, ensuring that these are student-centred, strategically driven, and aligned with best practices within the European Education Area. In its proposal for a Council recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, the Commission is proposing:

- the setting up of a **European degree policy lab**: on top of providing guidance and concrete action plans on moving towards a European degree (see section 5.2.1), it would also develop guidelines on the implementation of a cross-institutional quality assurance framework of alliances of higher education institutions;

- the setting up of a **‘European degree forum’** as an annual event, organised by the Commission, in cooperation with the Council Presidency, for all stakeholders to meet and take stock of the overall progress made towards a European degree, including through the European degree policy lab. The forum would include high-level representatives from Member States and regions, most representative stakeholders’ organisations in quality assurance (e.g. ENQA, EQAR), the network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC), national qualifications frameworks, education social partners and representatives from economic and social partners;
- further development of the database of external quality assurance results (DEQAR)<sup>22</sup> to make it more user-friendly and to link it directly with automatic recognition of qualifications;
- further support the implementation of the European graduate tracking system<sup>23</sup> to improve quality and relevance of higher education by providing feedback on graduate outcomes, as well as improving comparison and benchmarking across countries and institutions.

## ACTIONS:

In 2025, the Commission plans to set up a **European degree forum** to monitor progress on moving towards a European degree.

The Commission plans to further support the development of a **European graduate tracking system**.

The Commission invites Member States, universities, the higher education sector, economic and social partners to **co-design implementation guidelines and action plans for a European degree by participating in the European degree forum** and being actively involved in the work of the future European degree policy lab. They are also invited to embrace this opportunity to engage in active cooperation and offer students truly transnational learning experiences that prepare a skilled workforce ready to take up challenges on a European and global scale.

### 5.2.5. Support the implementation of the Council recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education

Effective and innovative transnational cooperation in higher education requires the commitment of high-quality academic staff who can engage in deep long-term partnerships with peers from other institutions. In its proposal for a Council recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education, the Commission is proposing to:

- prepare **guidelines** on good practice in higher education careers and staffing policies, as well as a competence framework for academic staff, building on existing relevant competence frameworks at Union

level, such as the European Competence Framework for Researchers;

- support organisation of dedicated social dialogue;
- monitor** key elements of the Recommendation through the **European Higher Education Sector Observatory**<sup>24</sup>;
- foster **synergies** with the Council Recommendation on establishing a European Framework to attract and retain research, innovation, and entrepreneurial talents in Europe, developed in the context of the European Research Area and applicable to research careers in all sectors, including academia;
- facilitate **peer learning** among Member States, higher education institutions, Erasmus Mundus practitioners and European Universities alliances on appropriately recognising academic staff engaged in transnational cooperation and teaching; sustainable career perspectives; and talent management measures for staff involved in coordinating and developing sustainable alliances, such as European Universities alliances.

## ACTION:

The Commission plans to support the uptake of the **Council recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers** in higher education through support, peer learning and monitoring.

### 5.2.6. Synergies with other related actions

The Commission is committed to ensuring synergies with other relevant actions and policies to support a smooth and successful path towards a European degree. To this end, it is planned to: continue to support the implementation of the Bologna process instruments and the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) network, via

<sup>22</sup> DEQAR is the Database of External Quality Assurance Results for quality assurance agencies listed on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). All EQAR-registered agencies can publish their reports in the Database. Participation in DEQAR is voluntary (<https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/>).

<sup>23</sup> Council Recommendation of 20 November 2017 on tracking graduates (OJ C 423, 9.12.2017, p. 1).

<sup>24</sup> 2024 annual work programme “Erasmus+”: the Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport C(2023)6157 of 18 September 2023.



‘**acceleration support teams**’, financed by the Erasmus+ programme, to ensure quicker progress on the automatic recognition of qualifications;

- continue to promote the opportunities to use the learning programmes, content and materials produced by European Net-Zero Industry Academies for joint degrees targeted at skills shortages for the green transition and net-zero technology industries;
- explore synergies and links between the Directive that sets out an EU framework on recognition of qualifications for access to regulated professions<sup>25</sup> and the European degree; and
- ensure consistency and synergies between the European degree and further work on the European Qualifications Framework<sup>26</sup>, the multilingual Europass platform<sup>27</sup>, the European digital credentials for learning<sup>28</sup> and the European classification of skills and occupations (ESCO)<sup>29</sup>.

## ACTIONS:

The Commission will continue its support for the implementation of the **Bologna process instruments** through the 2024 Erasmus+ European Higher Education Area call.

It plans to explore links between a European degree and the **Professional Qualifications Directive**, and ensure consistency with the **European Qualifications Framework, Europass, the European digital credentials for learning and the European classification of skills and occupation (ESCO)**.

### 5.2.7. Take stock of progress in close cooperation with Member States and stakeholders

Based on the progress achieved and the assessment of the fitness for purpose of the two entry points for a European degree, the Commission plans to launch further future-oriented work, including to:

- **review progress in Member States towards a European degree**, together with the European degree policy lab and the European degree forum;
- work with Member States to take further steps towards establishing a **legal status for alliances of higher education institutions**<sup>30</sup>.

## ACTIONS:

The Commission plans to take stock of **progress, in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders**, at every step towards the establishment of a European degree.

The Commission invites Member States to work towards a European degree by making use of the **support provided through EU instruments and peer learning**, to engage in the necessary reforms.

<sup>25</sup> Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications (OJ L 255, 30.9.2005, p. 22).

<sup>26</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (OJ C 189, 15.6.2017, p. 15).

<sup>27</sup> Europass.

<sup>28</sup> European Digital Credentials for learning.

<sup>29</sup> European classification of skills and occupations.

<sup>30</sup> As announced in the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities, 18 January 2022, COM(2022) 16 final.

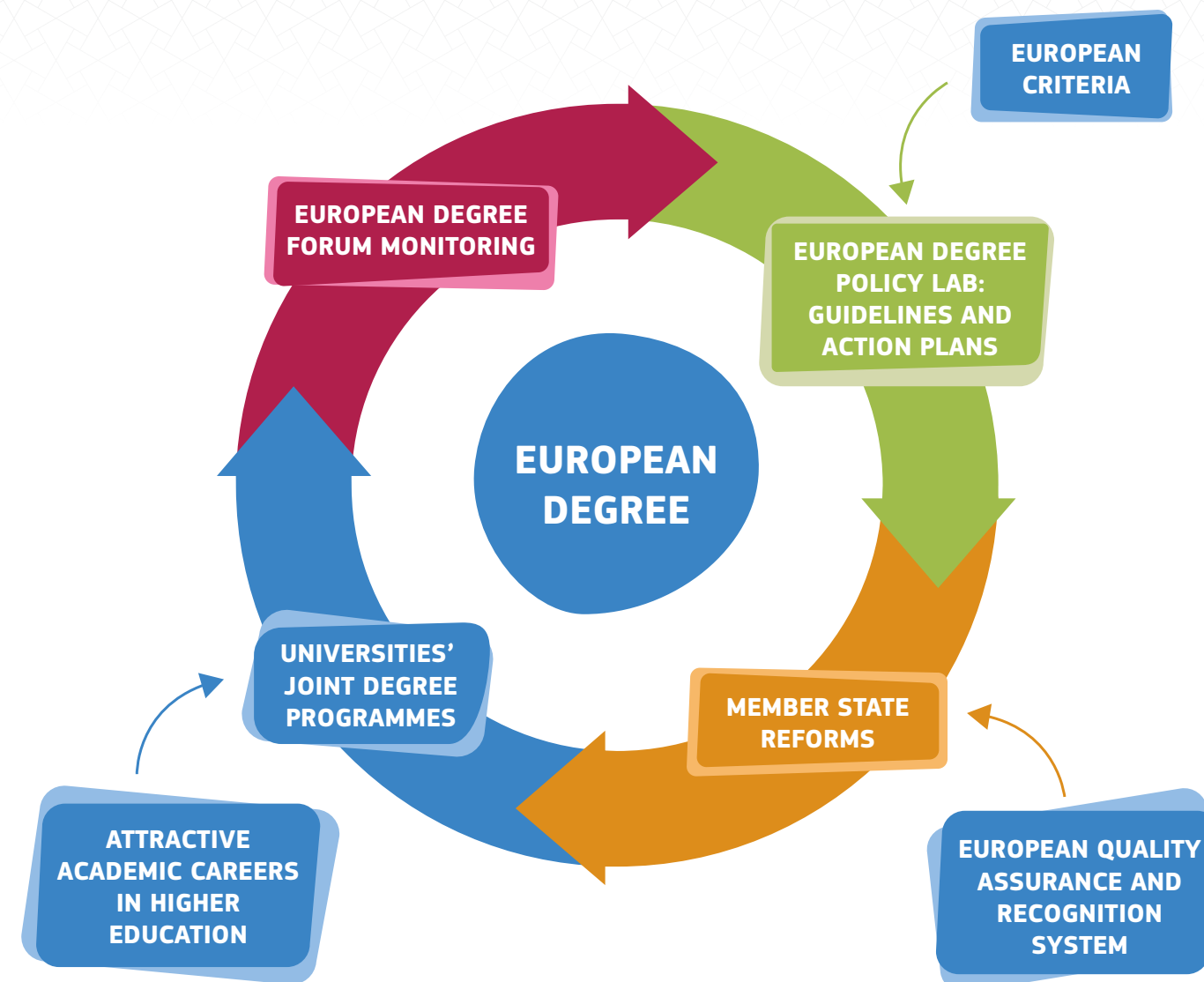
### 5.2.8. Monitoring and support for reforms

The Commission is highly committed to ensuring continued support to Member States in their path towards effective reforms leading to a European degree and encourages them to undertake steps to maximise the use of the EU budget and to leverage fully the support of appropriate and existing EU funding instruments. In addition, the Commission reminds Member States of the high relevance and importance of the Education and Training Monitor and European Semester process in supporting and accelerating the pace of national reforms.

As regards future support beyond 2027, the Commission recalls that its proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework and the related outcome of negotiations cannot be prejudged at this stage.

## ACTION:

The Commission plans to support Member States in their reforms towards a European degree and invites them to **make use of appropriate EU instruments** to engage in the necessary reforms.





## 6. CONCLUSION

With this Communication on a blueprint towards a European degree, the Commission invites Member States, competent regional governments and their higher education communities to join forces for the benefit of students, employers, universities and of the European Union as a whole.

The European degree is envisaged as a voluntary and flexible solution to overcome existing obstacles preventing the European Education Area from reaching its full potential. The staged approach will enable all educational systems, in full respect of their diversity, to choose their entry point onto a pathway towards a European degree. Member States will be in the driving seat and advance at their own pace with support from the Commission to facilitate dialogue and peer learning, provide incentives and explore synergies with other initiatives.

Just as Erasmus+ has had spillover effects in creating more exchange opportunities and a more flexible learning environment, the European degree would help

to make joint educational programmes more widespread for all higher education institutions, in full respect of subsidiarity.

By taking a further step towards the creation of a European degree, and by leveraging their unique European dimension, we are honouring the transnational collaborative efforts of European higher education institutions to provide students with unparalleled opportunities for personal growth, academic achievement, and European citizenship, giving them a better chance to succeed in today's global economy.

**A European degree would prepare students to navigate and succeed in a world where challenges and opportunities have no borders.**

This is how we must prepare our students to not only participate in the global economy but to lead it. **In doing so, we are not just increasing our Union's competitiveness, we are contributing to a more prosperous and more connected world.**



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