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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Council
Subject:	Draft Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education - <i>Adoption</i>

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1. On 30 April 2025, the Permanent Representatives Committee confirmed the agreement on the above-mentioned draft Recommendation, as set out in the Annex to this note.
2. The Council (EYCS) is therefore invited to adopt the draft Recommendation at its session on 12 May 2025.
3. Following its adoption, the Recommendation will be published in the Official Journal of the European Union.

Draft Council Recommendation

on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 165 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

1. Quality assurance systems are instrumental in establishing high quality standards for education and building trust among higher education systems and institutions across the European Education Area and beyond. They constitute a key building block of transnational cooperation. Ensuring quality of higher education is the foundation for mutual trust, which enables transnational cooperation and seamless learning mobility.
2. The main responsibility for the quality of their educational provision lies with higher education institutions, which should make the attainment of the highest standards a key institutional priority and develop quality assurance strategies and processes to ensure the achievement of that objective.

3. The implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) has been a fundamental step in the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), supporting the creation of a quality culture in higher education systems and institutions across Europe; however, the ESG have not yet been fully implemented in all Member States.
4. Societies across Europe are experiencing dynamic transformation, driven by the green and digital transitions, opportunities and challenges of artificial intelligence, demographic challenges and a rapidly changing geopolitical situation. Higher education systems should not only react, but actively contribute to and drive this transformation. Quality assurance processes should, when relevant, support higher education institutions in this transformational journey by providing expert reviews to enhance the quality of their educational offer.
5. The need to make quality assurance processes more agile, internationalised and fit for purpose should be tackled while ensuring that these processes remain focused on ensuring the highest quality standards. Obtaining feedback from graduates on their learning and career pathways and the relevance of the education, skills and competences acquired constitutes a valuable monitoring tool, which can be used to ensure quality and relevance at institutional and system level. The European Graduate Tracking Initiative<sup>1</sup> has contributed to making such tracking more systematic and comparable.
6. Diverging national quality assurance arrangements still create complexity for transnational cooperation in higher education, hampering the development of joint educational programmes and limiting educational opportunities for higher education institutions and students. It is important that demonstrating compliance with formal requirements is balanced with ensuring an ongoing emphasis on and commitment to continuous improvement in education provision, which is central to quality assurance.

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

7. Existing instruments, such as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (European Approach)<sup>2</sup>, are highly valued by the higher education community and Member States, but implementation remains scarce due to divergent national approaches.
8. Joint programmes have become a hallmark of the European Education Area and are highly valued by all higher education stakeholders. Adequate quality assurance arrangements are a pre-requisite for ensuring these joint programmes can be widely implemented across the Union. Awarding a joint European degree label on the basis of predefined criteria could help tackle existing issues related to quality assurance and accreditation of joint programmes. Further momentum for making it easier for higher education institutions engaged in transnational cooperation to provide joint programmes and award joint degrees, in accordance with the Bologna instruments, could be provided by a joint European degree at a later stage.
9. While discussions on the joint European degree are ongoing, a decision on its possible introduction has not yet been taken by the Council of the European Union and any reference to a joint European degree in this Council Recommendation should be understood in this sense. Clear and detailed information will be needed for the Council to make an evidence-informed decision on the next steps towards the joint European degree.
10. The European criteria in Annex II set out the key features of the joint European degree label and guarantee the respect of the highest standards to offer transnational programmes and showcase the specific European nature of such a label. These criteria are neither mandatory nor legally binding, but to ensure mutual trust, the joint European degree label is only awarded when all these criteria are met.

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<sup>2</sup> The approach, approved by EHEA ministers in May 2015, aims to ‘dismantle an important obstacle to the development of joint programmes by setting standards for these programmes that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria’.

11. The set of European criteria for the joint European degree label may represent a basis for those to be applied to the joint European degree at a later stage if, further to its analysis of the Commission's evaluation report on the implementation of the joint European degree label and the feasibility study on a joint European degree as described in the Council Resolution on a joint European degree label and the next steps towards a possible joint European degree: boosting Europe's competitiveness and the attractiveness of European higher education, the Council decides to take steps towards the introduction of a joint European degree. The feasibility study should include a thorough evaluation of the European criteria on the basis of which the joint European degree would be awarded and the corresponding quality assurance procedures as a basis for the Council decision on the criteria of the possible joint European degree.
12. In accordance with the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation<sup>3</sup>, several Member States encourage the use of the European Approach and are gradually moving towards more institutional external quality assurance systems and by doing so, making transnational higher education cooperation more effective and flexible. Reinforcing internal quality assurance systems is an important step towards speeding up processes while ensuring the highest quality standards.

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<sup>3</sup> Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation (OJ C 160, 13.4.2022, p. 1).

13. Alliances of higher education institutions, such as European Universities alliances, are at the forefront of transnational cooperation. Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education<sup>4</sup> state that ‘European Universities’ aim to contribute to the quality of transnational cooperation through interinstitutional strategies that combine learning and teaching, research, innovation and knowledge transfer into the economy and society, and contribute to policy and societal change. They are also important platforms for further developing the research and innovation dimensions within higher education institutions that need to pursue research-based learning, as well as long-term flexible and attractive research and teaching careers. These alliances commit to taking their cooperation to the next level by setting up European inter-university campuses where joint educational provision is the norm. As a key step in the creation of these campuses, alliances are building internal quality assurance systems that ensure that the quality of their joint educational provision meets the highest standards. Doing so will provide assurance to their stakeholders and will facilitate the joint provision of education. Key building blocks have been identified to start the exploration of a dedicated quality assurance framework and assess its use.

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<sup>4</sup> Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education (OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p. 14).

14. Automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad is necessary to make learning mobility a reality for all, to support balanced brain circulation among all Member States, and to foster competitiveness. In the 2018 Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad<sup>5</sup>, Member States were recommended to put in place the steps necessary to achieve automatic mutual recognition for the purpose of further learning without having to go through a separate recognition procedure, so that a higher education qualification acquired in one Member State is automatically recognised at the same level, for the purpose of accessing further studies, in the others, without prejudicing a higher education institution's or the competent authorities' right to set specific admission criteria for specific programmes or to check the authenticity of documents. Robust quality assurance systems are the foundation for building the necessary trust to ensure automatic recognition.
15. This Recommendation fully respects the principles of subsidiarity, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and will be implemented in accordance with national circumstances and in cooperation with Member States and all relevant stakeholders.

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<sup>5</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).

HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION:

**Improving all quality assurance systems**

1. It is recommended that Member States:
  - a) foster the continuous improvement of quality assurance, including with a view to enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education, and keep a high level of transnational trust and accountability within higher education institutions;
  - b) ensure that quality assurance systems are fit for purpose and hence able to respond to key societal, technological and economic developments affecting higher education. Higher education systems may take inspiration from existing good practices to address these aspects in different ways, for example by encouraging higher education institutions to include them in their internal quality assurance procedures, incorporating specific objectives in their regular external quality assurance or through focused or thematic quality reviews at system level. The main responsibility for the quality of their educational provisions lies with the higher education institution. Such an approach should be carried out in full alignment with the ESG, and could include topics such as:
    - i) promotion and protection of fundamental academic values, as defined by the Bologna process;



- ii) the relevance of teaching and learning outcomes for personal development, employability and active, critical and responsible citizenship, building, for example, on information from graduate tracking or closer cooperation with social partners, including curriculum design and offering internship opportunities<sup>6</sup>;
- iii) whether programmes (leading to a full degree or micro-credentials) are enhancing the competences (that is to say knowledge, skills and attitudes) of students and lifelong learners on key societal and economic priorities, such as the green and digital transitions;
- iv) relevant synergies between education, including vocational education and training, research, innovation, and service to society;
- v) inclusive higher education, as defined by the Bologna process, fostering, among other things, accessibility and gender equality, as well as student-centred learning and well-being;
- vi) attractive and sustainable academic careers and working conditions;<sup>7</sup>
- vii) strategies to strengthen international cooperation;

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<sup>6</sup> Council Recommendation of 20 November 2017 on tracking graduates (OJ C 423, 9.12.2017, p. 1).

<sup>7</sup> As defined in the Council Recommendation of 25 November 2024 on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education (OJ C, C/2024/7282, 5.12.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/7282/oj>).

- c) when possible, ensure that for higher education institutions, external quality assurance processes are fit for purpose and resource-efficient to avoid additional administrative burden.
- d) ensure that decisions on accreditation, registration and evaluation of higher education institutions and programmes are made in a transparent and objective way, in accordance with the ESG, with appropriate expert input and the participation of the higher education community, including students and academic and administrative staff, in fostering a quality culture.
- e) encourage higher education institutions to follow up the extent to which quality assurance procedures lead to an improvement in the quality of educational provision.
- f) encourage the publication of quality assurance reviews (be it at institutional or programme level) in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) and facilitate their translation, in order to improve the transnational transparency of the quality of higher education provision.

- g) ensure that institutional internal quality assurance systems cover the whole range of a higher education institution's educational provision. For educational provision leading to micro-credentials, use the European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability and the European principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials<sup>8</sup> as a reference.
- h) support and encourage quality assurance agencies to organise mutual learning activities, allowing national higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to benchmark their practices with those from elsewhere in the European Education Area. This can be done through bench-learning<sup>9</sup>, where higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies can learn from other leading higher education institutions, or through the analysis of data from European graduate tracking and the European Higher Education Sector Observatory.

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<sup>8</sup> As outlined in Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (OJ C 243, 27.6.2022, p. 10).

<sup>9</sup> Bench-learning is defined as a process for creating a systemic and integrated link between benchmarking and mutual learning activities in all the fields related to quality assurance in the field of higher education.

## Exploring the development of a dedicated framework for quality assurance for alliances of higher education institutions

2. It is recommended that Member States participate in the exploration of the development of a dedicated European framework to enable any type of alliance of higher education institutions engaged in sustainable, long-term cooperation that goes beyond ad-hoc or project-based cooperation to undergo a joint external evaluation of its joint internal quality assurance arrangements, covering all joint actions or at least the participating institutions' joint educational provision, such as joint programmes or joint micro-credentials, when needed.

This work should include the following actions:

- a) working together with quality assurance stakeholders and alliances of higher education institutions to explore the development of this dedicated quality assurance framework based on the building blocks included in Annex I to this Recommendation and test it, drawing on the results of the Erasmus+-funded EUniQ<sup>10</sup> and IMINQA<sup>11</sup> projects, where relevant;
- b) evaluating the need for this dedicated framework with a specific focus on whether it can lead to a significant reduction of administrative burdens and bring a clear added value for higher education institutions and other relevant actors;
- c) on the basis of the outcomes of the evaluation, allowing EU quality assurance agencies registered in the EQAR and those EU agencies which fully implement the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes to carry out such an external quality assurance evaluation, based on this framework;

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<sup>10</sup> The EUniQ project developed an approach for comprehensive quality assurance of European Universities.

<sup>11</sup> IMINQA is the umbrella project to support the Bologna Thematic Peer Group on Quality Assurance.

## **Making programme or combined approaches to external quality assurance more agile**

3. It is recommended that Member States:

- a) facilitate transnational cooperation and the agility of higher education systems by:
  - i) supporting higher education institutions to put in place or enhance a robust internal quality assurance process, and develop a strong institutional quality culture;
  - ii) once higher education institutions have a robust internal quality assurance process, encourage the move towards an institutional approach for quality assurance, for example by limiting compulsory programme accreditation by quality assurance agencies to initial accreditation for new programmes and, when possible, introducing self-re-accreditation procedures as part of the internal quality assurance process;
  - iii) strengthening the evidence-based approach to quality assurance, using a range of data, including from graduate tracking and the European Higher Education Sector Observatory; and
  - iv) supporting peer learning and capacity building for higher education institutions to strengthen their quality culture in the transition towards an institutional approach to external quality assurance;

- b) where not yet implemented, allow and encourage the use of the European Approach by:
  - i) removing quality assurance criteria added at national level or any other potential administrative or regulatory barrier;
  - ii) creating an enabling environment that provides guidance and support to people working in quality assurance, taking into account institutional autonomy;
  - iii) encouraging an environment where no financial disadvantage arises from its use in comparison to procedures carried out at national level.

### **Building the foundations towards the joint European degree label**

It is recommended that the joint European degree label is only awarded:

- a) when all the European criteria for a joint European degree label set out in Annex II are met,
- and
- b) to quality assured according to the ESG or recognised programmes, depending on national circumstances, in order to ensure the application of common standards and the quality and credibility of the label.

4. It is recommended that Member States:

- a) allow EU quality assurance agencies registered in the EQAR and those EU agencies which fully implement the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes to:
  - i) award the joint European degree label<sup>12</sup> to joint degree programmes built on the existing Bologna instruments and meeting the ESG as well as all European criteria set out in Annex II, where a programme or combined approach to external quality assurance is required;

or

- ii) grant all types of higher education institutions subject to national or regional external quality assurance at institutional level the ability to self-award the joint European degree label to their joint degree programmes based on internal quality assurance and compliance with the existing Bologna instruments, ESG and all European criteria;
- b) identify ways to complement the regular ESG review of the work of national quality assurance agencies in ensuring that joint programmes meet the European criteria; and create a repository of joint programmes that have met the European criteria and are eligible to award a joint European degree label.
- c) work with the Commission to assess whether the European criteria for a joint European degree label can also be applied to higher education programmes at EQF level 5 where applicable.

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<sup>12</sup> As mentioned in point 12 of the Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation (OJ C 160, 13.4.2022, p. 1).

## Implementing automatic recognition

5. It is recommended that Member States:

- a) encourage and support the evaluation of the implementation of automatic mutual recognition<sup>13</sup> through the internal and external quality assurance processes of higher education institutions;
- b) develop, in close cooperation with higher education institutions and other stakeholders involved, and issue clear guidance for higher education institutions on how to distinguish between automatic recognition of a qualification for access and higher education institutions' right to make decisions on admission to a specific programme. Review that guidance as needed, building on the outcomes of Erasmus+ accelerator team reviews<sup>14</sup> for the implementation of automatic recognition;
- c) support higher education institutions in taking a learning outcomes approach with regard to admission procedures, without prejudice to the ability of these institutions to determine their own specific admissions criteria;
- d) work with higher education institutions and national or regional recognition bodies to monitor recognition decisions, enhancing data collection and evidence-based approaches at the institutional, regional, national and European levels;

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<sup>13</sup> As defined in the 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>14</sup> As recommended in the Report from the Commission to the Council on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, 23 February 2023, COM(2023) 91 final.



- e) support higher education institutions in issuing all degrees and micro-credentials in a format compatible with the European Digital Credentials for Learning (EDC) standards, including the European Learning Model, as a key enabler of automatic recognition, through EDC's in-built checks of authenticity and proof of quality assurance and accreditation;
  - f) encourage and support capacity building and networking for staff in ENIC-NARIC centres and higher education institutions through training and digital tools, including in artificial intelligence, and ensure close cooperation with recognition and quality assurance authorities;
  - g) support close cooperation between staff working in recognition and in quality assurance both at the national and European level, between the ENIC-NARIC network and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).
6. It is recommended that Member States follow up on these Recommendations as soon as possible to allow all types of higher education institutions to implement the joint European degree label and explore the path towards a joint European degree, in line with the Council Resolution on a joint European degree label and the next steps towards a possible joint European degree: boosting Europe's competitiveness and the attractiveness of European higher education. They are invited, in the context of the European Education Area framework working structures<sup>15</sup>, to inform the Commission regularly of the measures taken at the appropriate level to support the objectives of this Recommendation as essential steps towards achieving and further developing the European Education Area.

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<sup>15</sup> As detailed in the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) (OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1).

INVITES THE COMMISSION TO:

7. Support the further development of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR)<sup>16</sup>, managed by the EQAR, to use it as the repository of the programmes that were awarded the joint European degree label, building on good practice by National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) that use it for automatic recognition.
8. Continue providing support for the development and promotion of graduate tracking practices to enhance the quality and relevance of higher education, as well as improving its comparison and benchmarking across countries and institutions.
9. Continue sharing with the Member States and the wide higher education community the accumulated experience of transnational cooperation initiatives such as European Universities alliances and programmes like Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Joint Doctorates or the specialised education programmes funded via the Digital Europe Programme<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</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.

<sup>17</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/694 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 establishing the Digital Europe Programme and repealing Decision (EU) 2015/2240 (OJ L 166, 11.5.2021, p. 1).

10. Encourage Member States to use the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) to access tailor-made technical expertise to design and implement the necessary reforms in the area of higher education, including by improving the governance and quality assurance mechanisms for higher education institutions.
11. Support bench-learning between quality assurance agencies.

Done at Brussels,

*For the Council*  
*The President*

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**Building blocks for exploring the development of a dedicated framework for quality assurance for alliances of higher education institutions**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The following building blocks are formulated to serve as a basis for exploring a full framework for a new quality assurance approach for alliances of higher education institutions. They benefit from the outcomes of the Erasmus+ funded projects QA-FIT and IMINQA. These building blocks were analysed together with quality assurance stakeholders and are not intended to duplicate any other quality assurance processes. They will be further explored together with Member States and higher education stakeholders. They will serve as a voluntary tool that alliances of higher education institutions may use to ensure the quality and the efficiency of their jointly managed activities.

**2. PURPOSE**

In line with the principles of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), a quality assurance evaluation would combine the twin purposes of accountability and enhancement, namely:

- a) contribute to the alliance's quality enhancement and support the alliance in achieving its objectives; and
- b) allow the alliance to demonstrate the quality of its jointly managed activities.

As a result, the evaluation, to be carried out by a quality assurance agency selected by the alliance, would:

- a) acknowledge that the cooperation of higher education institutions is an alliance, within the meaning of this Recommendation;
- b) lead to a reduction in the administrative burden for the alliance, by enabling jointly managed activities to undergo external quality assurance on a joint basis and only once during a set period of validity, instead of being subject to multiple national external quality assurance systems; and
- c) facilitate the quality assurance of joint educational provision by alliances, for example, joint programmes or micro-credentials.

### **3. PRINCIPLES**

The evaluation methodology developed by quality assurance agencies would:

- a) reflect the autonomy and diversity of alliances;
- b) encourage an alliance to establish a joint internal quality assurance system covering all its joint education provision;
- c) follow a once-only principle: the joint educational provision would be externally quality-assured only once within the same period of validity; and
- d) integrate all relevant parts of the ESG, the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and, where relevant, the European criteria for the joint European degree label as set out in Annex II to this Recommendation.

#### **4. ELIGIBILITY**

The evaluation would be open to any alliance of higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area.

The alliance should have some form of alliance-level internal quality assurance that takes responsibility for certain jointly managed activities.

#### **5. SCOPE**

The focus of the evaluation would be the effectiveness of the alliance's internal quality assurance and quality enhancement mechanisms. The alliance should determine and make transparent which joint educational provision and activities are subject to the common, alliance-level internal quality assurance.

#### **6. KEY FEATURES**

The evaluation would be based on standards that fully incorporate ESG Part 1.

The standards could also include confirmation that the alliance's internal quality assurance ensures that:

- a) joint education programmes offered by the alliance comply with the standards of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes; and
- b) joint education programmes meet the European criteria to deliver the joint European degree label if the alliance decides to deliver it.

The evaluation should be carried out by a EU quality assurance agency registered in the EQAR or a EU agency fully implementing the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, chosen by the alliance.

The evaluation should have a consistent methodology and procedure, to be set out in a full framework to be explored based on these building blocks, which are applied regardless of the agency performing the evaluation.

The methodology would ensure that each procedure is tailored to the individual alliance, considering the alliance's mission, composition (for example, size and geographic spread), and the scope of jointly managed activities.

## **7. RESULTS AND CONSEQUENCES**

The evaluation would result in a decision by the EU quality assurance agency registered in the EQAR or the EU agency fully implementing the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, which could be positive, positive with conditions or negative.

Taking into account national requirements, a positive evaluation decision would give the alliance the right to:

- a) self-accredit its joint educational provision covered by the evaluation, using the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes standards; and
- b) use the joint European degree label for those programmes that comply with the European criteria for a joint European degree label.

Member States could recognise a positive evaluation decision as follows:

- a) for national external quality assurance at institutional level: exempt all joint education provision that is covered by a joint internal quality assurance that passed the evaluation from undergoing additional national quality assurance procedures; and
- b) for national external quality assurance at programme level: exempt all programmes that are covered by a joint internal quality assurance that passed the evaluation from undergoing additional national quality assurance procedures.



**European criteria for a joint European degree label**

The European criteria are divided into two categories:

- The first category focuses on programme organisation<sup>18</sup>, based on criteria included in the ESG and the European Approach<sup>19</sup>;
- The second category focuses on the European dimension and includes the value-driven criteria, reflecting the importance of common European values. It promotes the values of the European Higher Education Area (academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance, public responsibility for higher education and public responsibility of higher education) and multilingualism, inclusiveness, environmental sustainability, interdisciplinarity, learning opportunities beyond academia and employability and digitalisation as the set of elements making the joint European degree label unique. In this respect, it is important for participating higher education institutions to have been awarded the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education and to have included the European dimension criteria in their joint arrangements<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Programme organisation refers to how the joint programme is set up and how it functions across partner institutions.

<sup>19</sup> Within a process of dynamic alignment, future changes to the ESG and the European Approach should also apply to the criteria for awarding the joint European degree label.

<sup>20</sup> Joint programme arrangements refer to the procedural and legal framework that regulates the joint programme's delivery and design. Joint arrangements can cover, for example, joint admission, student selection, joint curriculum, quality assurance procedures, assessment, the grading system, joint governance, sustainability policies, financial organisation, joint alumni approach, communication and dissemination strategy, joint intellectual property policies. Such arrangements are usually set in joint documents such as the consortium agreement.

The European criteria are structured in two categories to clearly reflect the primary responsibility of higher education institutions for safeguarding academic values, while acknowledging the importance of the European dimension.

The European criteria for awarding the joint European degree label are subject to verification by either a EU quality assurance agency registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) or a EU agency fully implementing the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes or, for example in the case of self-accrediting institutions, through self-evaluations. The criteria for awarding the joint European degree label are verified on the basis of self-declarations and accreditation or evaluation reports, as well as key documents outlining the joint programme's arrangements, such as consortium agreements among other things.

European criteria for a joint European degree label			EQF Levels
A. Programme organisation criteria			
	A1. Higher education institutions involved	The joint programme is offered by at least 2 higher education institutions from at least 2 different Member States.	6, 7, 8
	A2. 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.	6, 7
		The joint programme describes the learning outcomes and credits in line with the ECTS Users Guide.	6, 7

	A3. Joint arrangements for the joint programme	<p>The joint programme has joint policies, procedures and/or arrangements defining curriculum planning and delivery, as well as all organisational and administrative matters.</p> <p>Students' representatives are part of the decision-making process to define the joint policies and procedures and/or arrangements.</p>	6, 7, 8
	A4. Quality assurance arrangements	<p>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 higher education institutions, the field of study or the programme are evaluated by a EU quality assurance agency registered in the EQAR or a EU agency fully implementing the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.</p>	6, 7, 8

		The joint programme is evaluated using the standards of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (European Approach).	6, 7, 8
	A5. Graduate tracking	The joint programme monitors graduates through a graduate tracking system or using data collected by the European Higher Education Sector Observatory.	6, 7, 8
	A6. Student-centred learning	The joint programme is designed and continuously enhanced and delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in the learning process. Assessment of students reflects this approach.	6, 7, 8

	A7. Transnational campus – access to services	The programme has joint policies for students and staff to have access to relevant services in all participating higher education institutions under conditions equivalent to those for all enrolled students and local staff <sup>21</sup> .	6, 7, 8
	A8. Flexible and embedded student mobility	The joint programme offers student physical mobility of at least 30 ECTS (that can be split over several stays) at one or more partner institution(s). The joint programme has a policy offering alternatives for students who are unable to travel, such as virtual exchanges and/or blended mobility.	6, 7
		<p>The joint programme offers at least 6 months of physical mobility at one or more partner institution(s).</p> <p>The joint programme has a policy offering alternatives for students who are unable to travel.</p>	8
	A9. Co-evaluation and co-supervision for dissertations	Dissertations are supervised by at least 2 supervisors and co-evaluated by co-supervisors or a committee with members from at least 2 different institutions located in 2 different countries.	8

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<sup>21</sup> This does not imply an automatic right to financial benefits such as scholarships or social security at all institutions.

## B. European dimension criteria

	B1. Interdisciplinarity and research based learning	The joint programme's arrangements include embedded interdisciplinarity and/or research based learning components, tailored to the nature and circumstances of the joint programme.	6, 7, 8
	B2. Opportunities for learning beyond academia and employability	The joint programme's arrangements foresee opportunities to broaden the learning experience of students beyond the academic context, tailored to the nature and circumstances of the joint programme, including labour market requirements incorporating inter-sectoral components or activities and development of transversal skills <sup>22</sup> .	6, 7, 8

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<sup>22</sup> Such opportunities include, but are not limited to, elements such as cooperation with economic and social sectors in curricula design and/or implementation, internships, work-based learning, secondment / placement, volunteering, service learning and challenge-based approaches.

	B3. Digitalisation	The joint programme's arrangements include opportunities for students to develop adequate digital skills and competence, tailored to the nature and circumstances of the joint programme.	6, 7, 8
	B4. Values	The joint programme's arrangements adhere to the values of the European Higher Education Area (academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance, public responsibility for higher education, and public responsibility of higher education) and include a commitment to promote common European values <sup>23</sup> and democratic citizenship.	6, 7, 8

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<sup>23</sup> As expressed in Article 2 TEU and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.



	B5. Multilingualism	The joint programme's arrangements offer opportunities to equip each student with language skills through exposure to at least 2 different EU languages <sup>24</sup> during learning activities or mobility.	6, 7, 8
	B6. Inclusiveness	The joint programme's arrangements include a commitment to wide participation by fostering diversity, equality, and inclusion and by adopting tailored measures to support students and staff with fewer opportunities.	6, 7, 8
		The joint programme's arrangements include a commitment to respect the principles of the European Charter for Researchers.	8
	B7. Environmental sustainability	The joint programme's arrangements include policies and actions related to environmental sustainability and implement measures to minimise the environmental footprint of its activities, and foresee opportunities for students to develop adequate green skills and competences, tailored to the nature and circumstances of the joint programme.	6, 7, 8

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<sup>24</sup> Exposure to EU languages can take place in active and/or passive use of language(s), at any level in teaching and/or learning activities, examinations, research activities, professional or civic engagement activities and during mobility periods, including by going on mobility to a country where a different language is predominantly used in daily life.

## **Glossary of Terms**

**Alliance:** refers to a group of at least two European higher education institutions that have entered into transnational long-term, structural cooperation that is confirmed in a joint mission statement endorsed by each member of the alliance's relevant decision-making bodies at institutional level. This cooperation involves joint decision-making on governance and has offering joint education provision as a core mission. Notable examples include those alliances of higher education institutions funded under the European Universities initiative.

**Educational provision** refers to higher education provision in its broadest sense, including programmes leading to a full degree, courses leading to a micro-credential and provision that is not part of a programme leading to a formal degree.

**European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes:** approach that has been approved in May 2015 by European Ministers responsible for higher education and that has been developed to ease external quality assurance of these programmes: it defines standards that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria. The approach is expected to facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes, which genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character. The approach is available at:  
[https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02\\_European\\_Approach\\_QA\\_of\\_Joint\\_Programmes\\_v1\\_0.pdf](https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf)

**Evaluation:** refers to a quality assurance review of a higher education institution or educational provision, carried out either internally or externally.

**Joint degree programme** refers to a joint programme leading to a joint degree.

**Joint European degree:** The final shape and definition of the concept of ‘joint European degree’ is to be determined when the Council decides to take steps towards its introduction, following the analysis of the Commission’s evaluation report on the implementation of the joint European degree label and the feasibility study on the joint European degree as described in the Council Resolution on a joint European degree label and the next steps towards a possible joint European degree: boosting Europe’s competitiveness and the attractiveness of European higher education. At this stage, it can be defined as follows: A joint degree awarded to students to certify the completion of a joint programme delivered by two or more higher education institutions from different countries, including at least two EU Member States. The joint programme leading to the award of the joint European degree meets a common set of European criteria and is quality assured according to the ESG and the European Approach, which should facilitate automatic recognition in the EU. Where required by national qualification frameworks, the joint European degree may be integrated into national legislation to facilitate its implementation across the countries of the participating institutions.

**Joint European degree label:** A quality label granted to joint programmes delivered through transnational cooperation between higher education institutions from different countries, including at least two EU Member States, to act as a branding tool, promoting compliance with European standards and providing visibility and prestige to the labelled joint programmes. The label is granted based on common European criteria following an assessment by competent accreditation or quality assurance authorities, such as self-accrediting universities, accreditation agencies, or quality assurance bodies.

**Jointly managed activities:** refers to those activities of the alliance and its member higher education institutions that the alliance have decided to make subject to the alliance's joint internal quality assurance system.

**Joint programme** refers to an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions, leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree.

**Quality assurance** refers to the processes, both internal and external, carried out by a higher education institution or quality assurance agency, to ensure a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are equitable and fit for purpose.

Quality assurance activities have the twin purposes of:

- **Accountability:** A quality assurance system assures the higher education community and the public of the quality of the higher education institution's activities by compliance with a set of standards. It can be the basis for providing certain rights to the institution: recruiting students, awarding degrees, obtaining public funding.
- **Enhancement:** Quality assurance systems also provide advice and recommendations to and within higher education institutions on how they might improve what they are doing.

Taken together, accountability and enhancement of a quality assurance system create trust in the higher education institution's performance. They are key to supporting the development of a quality culture that is embraced by all: from the students and staff to the institutional leadership and management. The term 'quality assurance' is used in this document to describe all activities within the continuous improvement cycle, i.e., both accountability and enhancement activities.

- a) **Internal quality assurance** refers to the processes carried out internally by the higher education institutions themselves. They are usually developed as part of the quality assurance strategy of higher education institutions, acknowledging their primary responsibility for the quality of their provisions and its assurance.
- b) **External quality assurance** refers to the processes carried out by quality assurance agencies.
- c) **Institutional approach to external quality assurance** means that the institution needs to go through an external quality assurance process at institutional level only, to assess the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes of the institution, and whether the institution has a sufficiently mature quality culture to ensure the high quality of its learning provisions. It allows the institution to develop and deliver programmes without the need for an external quality review at programme level (this is called self-accreditation in many countries).
- d) **Programme approach to external quality assurance** means that each individual programme (or group of programmes) to be delivered by one or more higher education institution needs to go through an external quality assurance process review.

- e) **Combined approach to external quality assurance** refers to a situation where a higher education system has both institutional and programme approaches to external quality assurance. This is the case in most higher education systems in the EU<sup>25</sup>.

**Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG):** are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education. The ESG are not standards for quality, nor do they prescribe how the quality assurance processes are implemented, but they provide guidance, covering the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education. The ESG should be considered in a broader context that also includes qualifications frameworks, ECTS and the Diploma Supplement that also contribute to promoting the transparency and mutual trust in higher education in the EHEA. The ESG are available at: <https://www.enqa.eu/esg-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-the-european-higher-education-area/>.

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<sup>25</sup> In responses to a 2023 Commission survey on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation, 14 ministries reported that they apply a combined approach to external quality assurance.