

The European Degree: Enhancing Student Opportunities through Higher Education Cooperation

Reaction of the Erasmus Student Network
to the Blueprint for a European Degree



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On the 27th of March 2024, the **European Commission presented the Blueprint for the European Degree**. As part of a package of ambitious proposals for the higher education sector aiming towards the European Degree, the European Commission also presented two proposals for Council recommendations: a proposal for a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education and a proposal for Attractive and sustainable careers in higher education.

The Erasmus Student Network has been involved in three of the six approved pilot projects that explored the avenues for a European Degree: FOCI (Future-proof Criteria for Innovative European Education), ED-AFFICHE (European Degree: Advancing, Facilitation, and Fostering International Collaboration in Higher Education), and EDLab (European Degree Label Institutional Laboratory), contributing with the student perspective on the development of the European Degree.

Furthermore, ESN has been actively involved in different spaces such as consultations, meetings, and conferences and has actively contributed to the [Call for Evidence on the Commission's Proposal for Recommendation on the European Quality Assurance and Recognition System](#).

The Erasmus Student Network welcomes the proposal for the European degree label and the two ambitious proposals for Council Recommendation, as we expect the label to be the first step for a revolutionary setting in the higher education landscape.

On the whole, ESN believes the proposal for the European Degree sets new internationalisation opportunities for students, and it will also increase the chances for higher education institutions and national authorities to improve their internationalisation policies and enhance their cooperation, paving the way for the improvement of all mobility opportunities for individuals.

The European Degree, as a catalyst for seamless mobility

Set to promote more opportunities for mobility and internationalisation in higher education, the discussions surrounding the European Degree underscore reflections on the most tangible challenges international students encounter. To facilitate a successful implementation of the

European Degree, these challenges must be addressed to prevent their growth into other EU initiatives, particularly concerning the recognition of learning periods abroad. In this way, the European Degree was key to re-opening the conversation on the need for full automatic credit recognition. Even though the topic has been tackled by the European Commission several times through the last years (such as in the [Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation](#)), there is still uneven progress towards automatic credit recognition among countries in the European Higher Education Area.

In terms of full degree mobility, data from the Mobility Scoreboard 2022/2023 shows that only 13 education systems have system-level automatic recognition of degrees issued in all other countries, only 15 systems have automatic recognition for some European countries, usually based on regional, bilateral, or multilateral agreements and 11 education systems have no automatic recognition, and separate procedures apply to the qualifications issued by all the European Higher Education Area countries.¹ To further support this data, ESN's flagship research project, ESNsurvey XV, explored the challenges students face when recognising their degrees.

For less than half of the surveyed students (46%), their previous degrees or qualifications were recognised automatically in order to access higher education abroad. One-fourth of the students reported that the recognition took less than a month, but for one-third of the students (33%), this process took longer, sometimes even more than 6 months. Such long periods of waiting cost precious time and resources to students and prevent them from taking part in what could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pursue education in a different country. Furthermore, 16% of students faced problems with recognition either in their country of origin or in a different one. This data illustrates that for a large number of students, the recognition of diplomas still presents a challenge. **Among the difficulties encountered in the recognition of degrees, students listed having to pay high administrative costs (7%), the degree not meeting all conditions (6%) or not existing in the other country (4%).**

ESN appreciates that these challenges are addressed in the Blueprint for a European Degree and the proposal for a Council Recommendation for Quality Assurance and Recognition Systems. At the same time, ESN reiterates the importance of designing effective measures and

¹ European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the Communication on a blueprint for a European degree and the related proposals for Council recommendations - Publications Office, 2024, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/commission-staff-working-document-accompanying-the-communication-on-a-blueprint-for-a-european-degree-and-the-related-proposals-for-council-recommendations>

providing clear guidance for recognition of qualifications obtained abroad, adhering to common standards and criteria, ensuring a more accessible and seamless international education experience for students.

At the same time, as already reported by ESN in the Call for Evidence on the Commission's Proposal for Recommendation on the European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education, **there is a problematic trend in the recognition of credit mobility** as well. The [ESNsurvey XV preliminary report \(2023\)](#) illustrates that while choosing their mobility destination, students consider *"Matching courses which can be recognised by my home institution"* (66%) as a key factor for their decision, making recognition the second most important factor for their choice, only behind the affordability of the hosting city. Moreover, **42% of the respondents shared that their courses needed to be changed during the exchange, highlighting the importance of course information availability and accessibility, but most importantly, a need for improvement for the success of the European Degree.**

The new proposal for the European Degree presents an opportunity to enhance automatic recognition of learning outcomes, offering potential improvements in the following areas:

- An improvement in the use of the [ECTS Users Guide](#)². Currently, **only 6 European higher education systems are monitoring all key ECTS Users Guide principles** in the quality assurance evaluation of the implementation of ECTS in HEIs, while 17 countries are monitoring between only 2 and 4 key elements, 10 considering only one, and 6 do not follow the Guide as a reference at all.³
- Many students have reported having to complete additional work or assessments upon returning from their mobility experiences because their professors deemed the courses taken abroad unsatisfactory for their degree programme. Therefore, **inter-institutional agreements must be built on trust**, serving as a prerequisite for establishing exchange opportunities.
- Considering that embedded mobility is one of the proposed criteria for a European Degree, this also presents an opportunity **to reinforce the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education Commitments**. From this perspective, higher education institutions must

² European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *ECTS users' guide 2015* - , Publications Office, 2017, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/87192>

³ Mobility Scoreboard: Higher Education Background Report 2022/2023, Luxembourg : Publications Office of the European Union, 2023

focus more on capacity building and the progress achieved over the programming period. Erasmus Policy Statements should include clear references to the efforts made by HEIs to ensure this progress, while there should also be a commitment to gather more administrative data on automatic recognition of periods of study abroad.

- **Implementing mobility windows within joint programmes awarded with the European Degree is an opportunity to streamline mobility procedures.** While significant barriers exist for the European Degree to become a reality, particularly in the legal framework of national regulations, mechanisms for recognising learning mobility already exist. Building on the new opportunities already started to be explored by the European University Alliances could pave the way for more integration of mobility windows in degree programmes, thus enhancing seamless learning mobility.

Achieving seamless mobility, particularly concerning quality assurance and recognition of learning abroad, cannot be accomplished without the **commitment of Member States to amend their legal frameworks** to accommodate these necessary changes. This also entails recognising that the European Degree label represents the initial phase of a broader commitment. As highlighted by the FOCI pilot project, *although the current form of criteria may not be sufficient to remove all legal obstacles to the creation of common (European) joint degrees, the European degree label can be a first step towards finding common ground and building trust between Member States.*⁴ However, it is important to note that if Member States choose to adopt the label, there must be a firm commitment to enacting future legal changes that would establish the label as a recognised qualification within the European Degree framework.

The European Degree, as a way to promote quality of teaching

The European Degree is a new opportunity to attract international students by offering a uniquely European approach grounded in internationalisation, mobility and education quality. One of the conclusions drawn from the ED-AFFICHE pilot project, particularly evident in their survey to employers, is that the quality of teaching and the educational content are more

⁴ Future-proof Criteria for Innovative European Education, D4.1 –Policy recommendations on applying the European degree label criteria on diverse innovative models of flexible and societally relevant transnational European higher education (report) - <http://foci.csd.auth.gr/outcomes/>

incredibly significant.⁵ This suggests that, for employers, issuing a joint degree or implementing a joint programme does not necessarily equate to higher quality in the educational offering or the programme itself.

In this context, the European Degree presents a unique opportunity to provide innovative learning formats to students by offering a flexible learning pathway.

- The prospect of embracing a more flexible learning journey shifts the focus of higher education towards student-centred approaches **adjusted to the unique needs of individual learners**. This facilitates the refinement of curricula to suit students' specific requirements better. According to the ED-AFFICHE student survey, individual student plans emerge as a top priority for students, scoring 4.34 out of 5 in importance, underscoring the importance of adopting it as a guiding principle of international cooperation. This perspective also embraces the possibility of integrating **micro-credentials into higher education systems** under the European Degree framework. However, given the variance in regulations governing smaller educational units across countries, a need arises to address how the European Degree will be regulated.
- **Clear connections should be established between the label or the degree and other instruments within the EU, such as the European Student Card Initiative**. Students have noted challenges in accessing services, as they highly appreciate the openness and benefits of inter-campus services. Therefore, ensuring connectivity with other EU-funded initiatives, such as the European Student Card Initiative, will aid students in accessing services across various universities.
- With the European Degree, there is a unique opportunity to reshape how information is communicated to students. Data from the [XV ESNsurvey](#) regarding awareness of EU initiatives shows that **only 27% of non-mobile students** surveyed are aware of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master. Additionally, findings from the student survey used by the ED-AFFICHE pilot project indicate that **52% of respondents were unfamiliar with joint programmes**. The establishment of the European Degree presents an opportunity

⁵ European Degree: Advancing, Facilitation And Fostering International Collaboration in Higher Education, Deliverable D4.1 – ED-AFFICHE: Overview of Recommendations to improve European Degree Criteria - <https://www.charm-eu.eu/recommendations>.

to better **provide accurate and relevant information to students right from the outset in a manner that effectively captures their interest.**

- The European Degree also provides an opportunity **to revisit the themes of diversity and inclusion.** It offers a unique platform for discussing how to ensure accessibility of learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds. [Preliminary results from the XV ESN survey](#) highlight that inclusion and diversity have been the most successfully implemented priorities, with students expressing positive feedback. The challenge now is to replicate these positive outcomes across other mobility initiatives, ensuring that the European Degree is not just accessible to a select few but to all students.

When considering the pathway towards quality mobility, it is crucial to ensure that the European Degree remains accessible to all students. This includes addressing the legal disparities between countries, such as academic calendars, admission procedures, curriculum renewal schedules, thesis formats, and tuition fees.

The pilot projects and the European Commission, in the Higher Education Package, have underscored the necessity of reinforcing the Bologna tools, most precisely the European approach. However, it is important to acknowledge that effecting changes within the Bologna framework requires consensus among its members. Hence, we urge that discussions on this matter start rapidly among its members.

The European Degree, as an enhancer of student participation

Similar to the European Universities Alliances, the European Degree initiative was also born with the support of stakeholder consultation and student representation. As mentioned above, ESN was fortunate to be represented in three of the six pilot projects, and we believe this should be the path forward to ensure that the main beneficiaries of the degree have a voice in the most relevant decision-making structures of the European Degree.

As one of the main priorities stemming from the legacy of the European Year of Youth, we must ensure that elected students are represented in the already established

decision-making structures. Unfortunately, this has not been clear in all aspects of the Erasmus+ and the European University Alliances, but there is now the chance to shape a new future, including the future of new initiatives such as the European Degree.

The Erasmus Student Network welcomes the decision to create the European Degree Forum and the European Degree Policy Lab. Stakeholders should actively participate in shaping the label, aligning it with existing and ever-changing policy goals, and ensuring that the European Degree contributes to broader European priorities. ESN hopes that elected student representatives will have an opportunity to continue shaping the future of the European Degree.

The European Degree, as an enhancer of the learning mobility framework

Finally, the ambitious proposal for the European Degree Label aligns with the goals presented by the Commission proposal for the new [Learning Mobility Framework](#), especially by directly embedding mobility as one of the criteria of the European Degree label.

By including embedded mobility in the criteria of the European Degree Label, among other ambitious goals, the Blueprint for a European Degree supports the achievement of the targets set for mobility in higher education of 25% of graduates in higher education and even the 20% of all learners with fewer opportunities benefiting from learning mobility abroad.

However, it is important to emphasise that **having the opportunity to embed physical mobility in the curriculum of joint programmes awarded with the European Degree must go hand in hand with securing enough funding to ensure proper quality of mobility.** Additionally, the funding for the implementation of the European Degree should not come at the expense of decreasing funds for other mobility opportunities. In this perspective, to make the goals set by the European Degree a reality and maintain the amount and quality of mobility from the already existing initiatives, **there must be a careful assessment of the budget for the next edition of the Erasmus+ programme.**

Other relevant publications

- Erasmus Student Network. (2023). How to ensure Automatic Mutual Recognition of Learning Periods Abroad for all students? Available at: <https://esn.org/>
- Erasmus Student Network. (2023). ESNsurvey XV - Preliminary report. Available at: <https://www.esn.org/news/launch-preliminary-results-xv-esnsurvey>
- Erasmus Student Network (2023). More mobility, better mobility, more accessible mobility. The Contribution of the Erasmus Student Network to the Council Recommendation on a new Learning Mobility for all. Accessible at: <https://www.esn.org/news/contribution-esn-council-recommendation-new-learning-mobility-all>
- Erasmus Student Network (2023). NEW MONITORING FRAMEWORK OF THE ERASMUS CHARTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: An opportunity to boost institutional transformation through student mobility. Accessible at: <https://www.esn.org/news/new-monitoring-framework-erasmus-charter-higher-education>