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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

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THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Building on the vision put forward in the Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation ([1]),

In light of the Council conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe ([2]),

Taking note of the Commission Communication on a blueprint for a European degree ([3]),

1. REITERATES its unwavering commitment to equipping current and future generations with the knowledge, skills, competences and values necessary to navigate the defining challenges of our time, united in its vision of a resilient, prepared, innovative and prosperous Europe. As global shifts reshape our societies – armed conflicts at Europe's borders and beyond, the environmental crisis picking up speed, and technological transformations challenging industries and labour markets – we recognise the need for a forward-looking, coordinated and ambitious approach that strengthens Europe's competitiveness while preserving the richness of its cultural, artistic and intellectual heritage and diverse educational traditions.

2. RECOGNISES that the future of Europe depends on the strength of its citizens – educated, engaged and empowered to shape and take part in a dynamic and just society, and COMMITS to fostering generations of Europeans prepared to meet global challenges and an unpredictable future with resolve and innovation.

3. ACKNOWLEDGES the pivotal role of higher education institutions and alliances of higher education institutions, such as, for example, the 'European Universities', in driving academic and scientific excellence, pioneering technological breakthroughs and cultivating the essential knowledge, skills and competences required in the evolving world of work, including through interdisciplinary approaches that integrate diverse fields of study; RECOGNISES their key role in lifelong learning as a response to labour market transitions, in particular by developing flexible and tailored learning pathways, including, where appropriate, smaller learning units such as micro-credentials; and UNDERSCORES the need for renewed and ambitious European cooperation on higher education which sustains Europe's competitive edge and leadership on the global stage.

4. COMMITS to identifying and implementing strategic solutions that reinforce Europe's capacity to attract talent, retain expertise and lead the way in emerging sectors while removing obstacles to free movement of talent. This endeavour must be rooted in a strong educational foundation, facilitating transnational cooperation among institutions, fostering balanced, high-quality mobility and enhancing the adaptability of teaching and learning frameworks to the demands of the future, in particular by making full use of the opportunities offered by the Erasmus+ programme in all Member States.

5. AFFIRMS that education must serve not only as a tool for economic advancement, but above all as a means of nurturing the democratic, social and cultural fabric that unites society by strengthening a positive and inclusive sense of identity and belonging at local, regional, national and EU level, based on common European values.

6. REAFFIRMS that the European Union has a significant role in supporting education and training, while fully respecting the responsibility of Member States to shape their education and training policies, and STRESSES the importance of taking into account national, regional and local needs and circumstances when designing European initiatives.

7. HIGHLIGHTS that the European Education Area and the European Research Area, in synergy with the European Higher Education Area, are essential cooperation frameworks designed to support, enhance and drive education, teaching, creativity, research, knowledge transfer and innovation across Europe.

([1]) OJ C 160, 13.4.2022, p. 1.
([2]) OJ C 167, 21.4.2022, p. 9.
([3]) COM(2024) 144 final.

8. TAKES NOTE of the Letta report, which proposes the introduction of a fifth freedom encompassing research, innovation and education, as well as the development of a European degree to enhance transnational cooperation in higher education and to foster the circulation of talent across Europe in a more integrated single market. Furthermore, ACKNOWLEDGES the Draghi report, which emphasises that innovation is key to pursuing the green and digital transitions necessary to reinforce Europe's resilience, STRESSES the urgency of closing the innovation gap and HIGHLIGHTS the need for education and training systems to become more responsive to changing skill needs.

9. UNDERLINES that 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 that any reference to a joint European degree in this Council Resolution should be understood in this sense.

10. EMPHASISES the need to safeguard the autonomy and diversity of higher education institutions and, subject to EU law, equitable access to resources, including available Union funding, regardless of their form of operation, while respecting budgetary principles and the Union values enshrined in Article 2 TEU relevant in the implementation of the budget, and ADVOCATES an inclusive approach that enables all higher education institutions to benefit from European and international cooperation, ensuring that no institution is left behind in the pursuit of excellence.

11. UNDERLINES that any new initiative aimed at achieving the European Education Area – including the implementation of a joint European degree label and next steps towards a joint European degree – must be guided by a common, step-by-step approach, avoiding additional administrative burden for higher education institutions and national quality assurance agencies and financial commitments going beyond existing financial means, without prejudice to the negotiations on the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, and ensuring that progress is shared among all Member States, and COMMITS to advancing these efforts with coherence, ambition and an unwavering dedication to ensuring that education serves as the foundation for personal, social and professional fulfillment, as well as for active citizenship for all Europeans.

12. TAKES NOTE that the final outcomes of the Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects on the joint European degree label offer an opportunity for further discussions on how to make it easier for higher education institutions engaging in transnational cooperation to provide joint programmes and award joint degrees, in accordance with the Bologna instruments, including through relevant initiatives such as the joint European degree. The rollout of the European degree label has the potential to increase the number of joint study programmes so that a critical mass is achieved and there is greater impetus for Member States to remove a number of obstacles concerning the provision of joint study programmes.

13. AGREES that the joint European degree label and the outcomes of the next steps towards a joint European degree can have the potential to increase the attractiveness of joint study programmes, mobility and eventually automatic recognition, to create a forward-looking educational environment that nurtures innovation and fosters cross-border collaboration, and to strengthen European higher education and its global standing, for the benefit of today's citizens and the generations that will shape Europe's future.

14. EMPHASISES that the actions set out in this Resolution should be pursued while taking into account the education and training systems in the different national legal frameworks.

IDENTIFIES THE FOLLOWING THREE PHASES WITH A VIEW TO IMPLEMENTING A JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE LABEL AND PAVING THE WAY FOR A JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE:

1. PHASE 1: FINALISING THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE ROLLOUT OF THE JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE LABEL (2025-2026)

2. PHASE 2: ROLLOUT OF THE JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE LABEL, MONITORING ITS IMPLEMENTATION, EVALUATING ITS USE AND CONDUCTING FEASIBILITY AND EXPLORATORY WORKS ON A JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE (2026-2028)

3. PHASE 3: REFLECTING AND MAKING AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISION ON NEXT STEPS TOWARDS A JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE (2029)

1. **PHASE 1: FINALISING THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE ROLLOUT OF THE JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE LABEL (2025-2026)**

THE COMMISSION IS INVITED, together with the Member States and in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, to:

a) establish a Policy Lab in the context of the Working Group on Higher Education of the European Education Area strategic framework, which is to be tasked with developing a comprehensive framework for the joint European degree label and responsibilities such as:

— drawing up clear definitions, descriptions, indicators and a common method for verifying compliance with the criteria set out in Annex II to the Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, in full respect of Member States' competences in the area of education and training as well as the principle of subsidiarity;

— developing guidelines and procedures for issuing the joint European degree label;

— designing a standardised template for the visual identity of the label, including its graphic representation, in both physical and digital formats.

The Policy Lab will be composed of Member States representatives who are members of the Working Group on Higher Education of the European Education Area strategic framework (or any successor group established under this framework) and other experts delegated by the Member States, alongside representatives of the Commission. Experts invited by the Policy Lab may contribute to the Lab's work on specific topics, as needed. The activities of the Lab should be jointly steered by Member States and the Commission, and technical and organisational support will be provided by the Commission.

b) present the outcomes of the Policy Lab of the Working Group on Higher Education of the European Education Area strategic framework to the Council by mid-2026, to enable the effective rollout of the joint European degree label in 2026.

FURTHERMORE, MEMBER STATES ARE INVITED TO

a) where this has not yet been done, fully implement Bologna instruments – such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement, the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes – as key facilitators for implementing the joint European degree label. This measure should foster deeper and more flexible transnational cooperation across Europe, particularly in anticipation of the rollout of the joint European degree label and the next steps towards a joint European degree;

b) take the necessary measures to enable the rollout of the joint European degree label by the end of 2026, thereby ensuring consistency and equal opportunities for all higher education institutions in Europe.

2. **PHASE 2: ROLLOUT OF THE JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE LABEL, MONITORING ITS IMPLEMENTATION, EVALUATING ITS USE AND CONDUCTING FEASIBILITY AND EXPLORATORY WORKS ON A JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE (2026-2028)**

THE COMMISSION AND MEMBER STATES ARE INVITED TO

a) roll out together the joint European degree label from 2026 to 2028 and guide the process, with the aim of testing its feasibility and assessing its potential implications from a political, legal, financial and administrative point of view and the extent to which obstacles to transnational cooperation on joint degrees in the higher education sector, such as those identified in the final outcomes of the Erasmus+ policy experimentation projects on the joint European degree label, have been removed;

b) use the Policy Lab of the Working Group on Higher Education of the European Education Area strategic framework, as a platform for evaluating progress in the rollout of the joint European degree label, facilitating structured engagement with higher education institutions, students, quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders, and exploring the concept and feasibility of a joint European degree with an eye to next steps and the way forward.

THE COMMISSION IS INVITED TO

a) design targeted actions to support higher education institutions interested in issuing the joint European degree label in the context of joint programmes;

b) promote the visibility of and share information about the joint European degree label among higher education institutions, students, employers and society at large. These efforts could include developing a visual identity and a communication and branding strategy that showcase the label's added value for learners, research and innovation across Member States, as well as its potential to attract international students;

c) provide annual feedback to the Council once the rollout of the joint European degree label has started. This feedback should include insights into the implementation process, emerging challenges and any lessons learned, enabling necessary adjustments to be made to support the rollout's success;

d) monitor and conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the rollout phase, in close cooperation with the Policy Lab of the Working Group on Higher Education of the European Education Area strategic framework, which will assess:

   — its outcomes and the potential added value of the joint European degree label, with particular attention to feasibility, challenges encountered and any potential impact of the initiative;

   — the relevance of the joint European degree label in supporting transnational cooperation, increasing the attractiveness and number of joint study programmes in the EU, strengthening the global competitiveness of European higher education and enhancing balanced mobility for students and staff;

e) conduct a feasibility study for the joint European degree, together with the Policy Lab of the Working Group on Higher Education of the European Education Area strategic framework, evaluating the European criteria on the basis of which this joint degree would be awarded, the corresponding quality assurance procedures and the degree's potential to remove obstacles to transnational cooperation on joint degrees in the higher education sector, analysing its impact on the value and recognition of academic programmes and awarding higher education institutions, and examining student perspectives, including key challenges, perceived benefits, and possible alternative approaches;

f) submit an evaluation report on the implementation of the joint European degree label and the feasibility study on a joint European degree to the Council for further decision by the end of 2028.

MEMBER STATES ARE ENCOURAGED TO

a) share relevant data with the Commission to facilitate a comprehensive evaluation of the rollout.

3. PHASE 3: REFLECTING AND MAKING AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISION ON NEXT STEPS TOWARDS A JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE (2029)

Based on the results of 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, the Council may decide on the long-term implementation of the joint European degree label and invite the Commission to propose specific next steps towards the introduction of a joint European degree. The establishment of such a joint degree could open up new avenues for the future of higher education in the European Union and serve as a means of fostering the personal, social and professional development and active citizenship of current and future generations.