



EUROPEAN
UNIVERSITY
ALLIANCE

Context, guidelines, and good practice examples

*for the preparation of transnational joint
programmes pursuing the Joint European
Degree Label*

4EU+ ETERNITY

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to briefly recapitulate the most recent developments surrounding the implementation of Joint European Degree Label, especially on the front of policy codification, and to then provide good practice examples and guidelines detailing how to conceive of transnational joint programmes in a way that would maximize their compliance with the respective criteria through several “case studies”.

Policy context

In 2024, The European Commission published “Blueprint for a European Degree” package to set out a strategic pathway to create a new, automatically recognised qualification based on transnational joint programmes delivered by consortia of universities. The package consisted of three main documents: (1) a Communication on the blueprint for a European degree, (2) a proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system, and (3) a proposal for a Council Recommendation on attractive and sustainable academic careers¹. Together, they aimed to remove legal and administrative barriers to joint programmes and to strengthen trust, mobility, and competitiveness in the European Education Area.

The blueprint defined the European degree as a jointly awarded, voluntary qualification based on common EU-level criteria and automatic recognition. It proposed a gradual implementation pathway with two entry points: a preparatory European degree label, awarded to compliant joint programmes, and a full European degree that could later be issued jointly or by a European legal entity. Supporting instruments included a European Degree Policy Lab, Erasmus+ pathway projects, and coordination forums.

In May 2025, the Council of the European Union advanced this agenda through the adoption of two complementary acts adopted under the Polish Presidency: a Council resolution on a joint European degree label with a roadmap, and a Council recommendation defining criteria and quality requirements². The roadmap followed three phases until 2029: design, rollout and evaluation, and a final decision on introducing a full European degree. The first phase concerns the finalization of preparations for the launch of the “joint European degree label” and is scheduled for the years 2025 to 2026. The second phase is to run between 2026 and 2028, and its purpose

¹ [Commission presents a blueprint for a European degree | European Education Area](#)

² [Council takes steps towards a new joint European degree label - Consilium](#)

is to implement the “joint European degree label” in practice, monitor its impacts, evaluate its added value, and initiate a feasibility study and demand analysis for a full-fledged “joint European degree.” The third phase, set for 2029, is to be devoted to critical reflection and the preparation of a data-based decision on whether, and in what form, to proceed with the implementation of a full “joint European degree”- that is, no longer in the form of a “label,” but as a fully-fledged diploma. The label was intended to confirm compliance with common standards and relied on strengthened quality assurance, mutual recognition, and Bologna tools. Both documents were approved unanimously.

The accompanying Commission Staff Working Document further elaborated on the criteria, governance, and award processes, emphasising common standards, accreditation, and institutional cooperation in delivering joint degrees and ensuring automatic recognition.

In May 2026, after several months of intensive preparation from the side of The European Commission, the member states, and several other stakeholders in the European Degree Policy Lab, the Council of the European Union approved the Operational guide for the Joint European Degree Label³. This document effectively opens the possibility to implement the Joint European Degree Label, as it details all the necessary procedures (validation steps, appeals, connection to European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, different pathways based on the underlying accreditation elements) as well as quite detailed description of how every criterion should be interpreted and assessed. The Guide is complemented by an extensive list of annexes (glossary, templates, indicative list of evidence etc.) that should enable seamless implementation, once the required authorities - national or regional quality assurance agencies - develop their internal procedures for validating the procedural formalities.

The policy development can be thus summarized in the following way:

1. Publication of the Blueprint for a European Degree (2024): the European Commission established the concept, objectives, and instruments for a European degree and its preparatory label.
2. Council endorsement under the Polish Presidency (2025): the Council of the European Commission approved the policy framework through a resolution and recommendation, set criteria, and defined the phased roadmap.
3. Adoption of the Operational Guide for the European Degree Label (2026): the Council of the European Union validated the Operational guide detailing the necessary assessment and quality assurance arrangements to enable practical implementation of the label. Also, the first templates for the certificates were published as an annex to the Guide.

³ [Operational guide for the Joint European Degree Label - Publications Office of the EU](#)

Context of the good practice examples

The following and main section contains detailed guidelines as to how the individual criteria can be fulfilled. Instead of providing general instruction that would limit itself to a merely theoretical commentary, the section uses the example of four concrete criteria. They were deliberately chosen to serve as symptomatic representatives of the different attributes, which the criteria together as a manifold cover. As a direct result, three of the following four examples are originating from the B-section of the criteria, as it is these criteria that cover the “European dimension” and represent the added value of the Joint European Degree Label the most - but also bring the most challenges and bottlenecks.

The first is A.7 (TRANSNATIONAL CAMPUS – ACCESS TO SERVICES), the principal reason for its selection being the fact that it describes something intrinsic to transnational joint programmes, something that programme directors used to regular domestic programmes have continuously reported to be unfamiliar with. The topic as such also remains a challenge for many programmes, venturing into institutional setting (legal status) of alliances and joint programmes. Second “exemplary case”, criterion B.1 (INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND RESEARCH-BASED LEARNING) was selected because it directly engages with the contents, or rather the orientation and composition, of the learning experience. For some programmes, it will be very easy to accommodate these requirements, as it is in their intrinsic nature. For some (theoretically and academically oriented ones, it will be much more complicated to exhibit these features, hence the concrete suggestions in this document. As a third example, the criterion B.3 (DIGITALISATION) deals with the omnipresent issue of digital and IT components of study programmes, highlighting the emphasis of the European Commission and the Council of the European Union on the future-proof aspect of transnational education. Our instruction should once again provide clear examples and guidelines as to how this can be completed even by programmes that do not belong in the STEM domain. Lastly, the criterion B.7 (ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY) was selected to explain how transnational joint programmes can exhibit sufficient levels of compatibility with something that usually exceeds their scope and entails wider institutional conduct. The above mentioned four examples stand for the more complicated criteria and were selected based on gathered feedback. First, every sub-section begins with a brief explanation as to what is the goal of the particular criterion, and is followed by a set of aims, distinguished by various circumstances and levels of ambition, that accommodate each particular problem. These hand-crafted examples were prepared by staff with vast experience with joint programmes in the roles of administrators, staff and student alike, and should offer an approach that can be generalized and mirrored when working with all the criteria - not just the exemplary four.

The document is concluded by a glossary of the most significant terms that are frequently used in the context of the Joint European Degree Label and the relevant policies. Instead of defining or redefining them, the glossary offers definitions stemming from the relevant legal and policy-

oriented anchoring. The purpose of this last section is to provide a hermeneutical lens through which the more general notions and quality assurance tools accompanying the criteria can be understood, even by staff that is not oriented on quality assurance of transnational joint programmes, such as academics, managers, and administrators in different positions.

Examples: how to comply with the criteria and demonstrate it?

The following sections provide practical guidance to help you check whether your joint programme meets the criteria for the European Degree Label.

For each criterion, you will find:

- an explanation of what the criterion means in practice,
- a short list of key elements to focus on when designing or reviewing your programme,
- examples of how compliance can be demonstrated, based on typical programme and consortium documentation.

These examples are not prescriptive. Joint programmes can meet the criteria in different ways, depending on their field, level (EQF 6, 7, 8), size, and delivery model.

Use the examples as a reference point to identify strengths, gaps, and areas for improvement in your programme.

Example 1: CRITERION A7: TRANSNATIONAL CAMPUS – ACCESS TO SERVICES.

What this really means

Think of your programme as one shared campus - even if it runs across several countries.

Your goal is simple: students and staff should be able to use services at every partner institution, under the same conditions as local students and staff.

This should work throughout the whole programme - whether participants are on-site, online, or moving between institutions.

What you should aim for

If you want your programme to meet this criterion, focus on three things:

1. Access to physical facilities during mobility

When students or staff are physically at a partner institution, they should be able to use key facilities just like local users.

This includes, for example:

- labs
 - study spaces
 - libraries
2. Access to IT services throughout the programme

Participants should not “lose access” when they move between institutions. Make sure they can use:

- learning platforms
 - online libraries
 - virtual or hybrid classrooms
 - other digital tools needed for their studies or work
3. Access to support services

Students and staff should be able to access relevant support services across the consortium.

These may include:

- social and financial support system
- academic and career support
- wellbeing and counselling services
- housing and integration support
- Ombudsman office
- international offices (visa, onboarding, practical matters)

How to show that you meet the criterion

You need to demonstrate that this is clearly organised and actually works in practice.

You can do this through:

- Consortium agreement defining joint policies, responsibilities, and mechanisms ensuring equivalent access to services across institutions
- Programme level documentation, such as handbooks or guides, clearly outlining participants’ entitlement to services at each partner institution
- Quality assurance documentation, including programme review reports and annual monitoring, addressing accessibility and adequacy of services
- Feedback and monitoring data, including student and staff surveys, user satisfaction reports, and documented follow-up actions related to access to services

Example 2: CRITERION B1: INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND RESEARCH-BASED LEARNING.

What this really means

Your programme should give students the opportunity to go beyond a single discipline and/or actively engage in research.

This does not mean that the entire curriculum must be interdisciplinary.

Instead, think of it as ensuring that at least one meaningful part of the programme allows students to:

- combine perspectives from different fields, and/or
- learn through research, investigation, or problem-solving.

The key is that this is planned, visible in the curriculum, and assessed, not incidental.

What you should aim for

If you want your programme to meet this criterion, focus on three things:

1. Clear learning outcomes

Your intended learning outcomes should explicitly include:

- interdisciplinary competences (e.g. integrating knowledge/methods/perspectives from different fields), and/or
- research skills (e.g. inquiry, analysis, use of methods)

These should be visible at programme and/or course level.

2. Alignment between learning and assessment

It is not enough to include these elements in teaching - they must also be properly assessed.

Make sure that assessment methods (e.g. projects, reports, thesis, presentations) are clearly linked to interdisciplinary and/or research-based learning outcomes.

3. At least one structured learning component

Your programme should include at least one clearly defined and documented component where students engage in interdisciplinary and/or research-based learning.

This component should be a compulsory part of the curriculum, ensuring that all students benefit from this experience (not only those who select specific electives).

This may take different forms, for example:

- Interdisciplinary course or module
- challenge-based or problem-based project
- collaborative project across disciplines or institutions

- supervised research project or thesis
- laboratory work or fieldwork
- inquiry-based or research-oriented course

The format can vary, what matters is that it is intentional, structured, and part of the curriculum.

How to show that you meet the criterion

You need to demonstrate that this is clearly designed, implemented, and assessed.

You can do this through:

- Programme documentation, including consortium agreement and curriculum descriptions, indicating the presence of interdisciplinary and/or research-based components
- Course catalogues and syllabi, clearly describing learning outcomes, credits, teaching methods, and assessment aligned with interdisciplinary and/or research-based learning
- Operational evidence, such as student project descriptions, thesis guidelines, laboratory or fieldwork documentation, demonstrating how such learning is implemented in practice
- Quality assurance and review documentation, confirming the design, delivery, and continuous improvement of interdisciplinary and/or research-based learning components

Example 3: CRITERION B3: DIGITALISATION.

What this really means

Your programme should ensure that students develop the digital skills they need for their studies, future careers, and everyday life in a digital society.

There is no single model to follow. The type of digital skills will depend on your field and level (EQF 6, 7, or 8).

What matters is that digital competences are actually accessible to students during the programme

These skills can be developed within the curriculum or through additional learning opportunities offered by the partner institutions.

What you should aim for

To meet this criterion, your programme should ensure at least one of the following is in place:

1. Digital skills integrated into the curriculum

Students develop digital competences as part of their regular studies.

This may include:

- use of discipline-specific tools (e.g. software, data analysis, digital methods)
- digital research or project work
- learning activities where digital tools are an essential part of the course

OR

2. Additional opportunities to develop digital skills

Students can access opportunities outside (or alongside) the core curriculum to strengthen their digital competences. These opportunities are typically offered through central services or institutional provision at partner institutions, and made accessible to joint programme students.

These may include:

- workshops or short training courses
- certifications
- use of learning platforms and collaborative online tools
- virtual labs, simulation software, or other digital environments

In both cases, digital competences can include:

- field-specific skills
- as well as broader digital literacy, such as information management, digital communication, ethical use of technology, cybersecurity, and digital wellbeing

The approach does not need to be identical across all partners.

How to show that you meet the criterion

You need to demonstrate that at least one of these approaches is clearly defined and available to students.

You can do this through:

- Consortium-level and programme documentation, outlining the integration of digital competences within curricular and/or extracurricular provision
- Programme handbook, curriculum descriptions, course catalogues, and syllabi, specifying learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment related to digital skills

- Operational evidence, such as descriptions of training activities, workshops, or access to digital tools and platforms provided by partner institutions
- Quality assurance and review documentation, confirming that digital competences are addressed, monitored, and continuously enhanced within the programme

Example 4: CRITERION B7: ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY.

What this really means

Your programme should show a clear commitment to environmental sustainability in two ways:

- how the programme is organised and delivered, and
- what students learn

This does not mean you need to redesign your entire curriculum around sustainability.

Instead, think of it as ensuring that:

- your programme actively reduces its environmental impact where possible, and
- students have real opportunities to develop relevant green skills.

What you should aim for

To meet this criterion, your programme should address two complementary areas:

1. Sustainable programme operations

You should take practical and coordinated steps to reduce the environmental footprint of your programme.

This is especially important for:

- mobility between partner institutions
- joint activities (e.g. meetings, teaching, events)

Measures may include, for example:

- use of virtual or hybrid formats where appropriate
- encouraging more sustainable travel options
- reducing unnecessary travel
- paperless administration and digital processes
- sustainable event organisation

These measures should be realistic and not compromise academic quality or inclusiveness.

The programme should also consider its long-term sustainability and efficient use of resources, ensuring that organisational and financial arrangements support continuity and responsible management over time.

2. Opportunities to develop green skills and competences

Students should have opportunities to learn about sustainability in ways that are relevant to the programme.

This does not need to be a core focus in all disciplines. What matters is that opportunities are:

- meaningful and appropriate to the field
- aligned with the programme's learning outcomes and graduate profile

These may be provided, for example, through:

- courses or modules related to sustainability (e.g. environmental policy, sustainable technologies, impact assessment)
- integration of sustainability topics into existing courses where relevant
- transversal opportunities such as:
 - institution-wide modules
 - micro-credentials
 - seminars or guest lectures

How to show that you meet the criterion

You need to demonstrate that both operational measures and learning opportunities are clearly defined and implemented.

You can do this through:

- Consortium agreement outlining joint policies and responsibilities related to sustainability in programme operations and student learning
- Programme documentation, such as handbook, curriculum overview, course catalogue, and syllabi, detailing green skills and competences and corresponding learning outcomes
- Operational evidence, including sustainability reports, guidance documents on sustainable mobility or event management, and records of footprint-reduction measures implemented across partner institutions

- Quality assurance and review processes, confirming the integration and monitoring of sustainability measures and student learning opportunities

Glossary

This glossary has been prepared for the internal purposes of the 4EU+ Alliance. It lists the most common terms used in connection to the European Degree initiative. Its purpose is to provide elementary explanations and highlight differences in their meanings. To avoid interpretation disputes, the definitions and explanations are based on already existing policy oriented materials, analyses, and guidelines. Note that as the policy making processes on European level develops, the emphasis of different terms might shift or they might be redefined - but as of 2026, these sources provide very accurate guidance for people whose expertise is not transnational studies.

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.

Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, p. 35

(<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8672-2025-INIT/en/pdf>)

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.

Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, p. 35

(<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8672-2025-INIT/en/pdf>)

European criteria

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.

Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, p. 4 (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8672-2025-INIT/en/pdf>)

Joint programme

Joint programmes are understood as an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions (...), and leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree.

EQAR <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/definitions/>

A joint programme is a programme offered jointly by several higher education institutions. These institutions can be located either in the same country or in different countries (...). A joint programme does not necessarily lead to a joint degree. It is only one of the possible awards. (...)

One of the products of the intergovernmental Bologna Process, the 2012 Implementation Report (p.185), indicates that joint programmes have all or at least some of the following characteristics:

- *The programmes are jointly developed and/or approved by several institutions;*
- *Students from each participating institution study parts of the programme at other institutions;*
- *The students' stays at the participating institutions are of comparable length;*
- *Periods of study and exams passed at the partner institution(s) are fully and automatically recognised;*
- *Professors of each participating institution also teach at the other institutions, jointly work out the curriculum, and form joint admission and examination commissions;*
- *After completion of the full programme, the student either obtains the national degrees of each participating institution or a degree awarded jointly by them.*

[Joint programmes from A to Z - A reference guide for practitioners](#), p. 11.

Joint degree

Joint degree: A single document awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme and nationally acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme.

EQAR <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/definitions/>

The joint degree is a single document awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme. This degree is acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme in all relevant countries. Since it is a joint award, this means that it is presented as a single document. The joint degree replaces typical institutional or national degrees and it therefore must be nationally acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme. This also means that the joint degree is issued and signed as stipulated in the relevant national legislation, i.e. signed by the competent authorities (rector, vicechancellor, etc.) as the representatives of the institutions involved in the joint degree.

[Recognition of qualifications from joint programmes](#), p. 17.

Double/multiple degree

Double/multiple degrees: Separate degrees awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme attesting the successful completion of this programme (if two degrees are awarded by two institutions, this is a 'double degree').

EQAR <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/definitions/>

When higher education institutions involved in offering the joint programme award separate documents after successful completion of this joint programme, this award is referred to as a multiple degree. It is important to stress here that only the combination of the separate documents should be regarded as the degree. It is in fact a multiple degree because there are multiple documents that combine to create the degree; not because a graduate receives multiple individual degrees. In reality, in most higher education systems it is difficult to distinguish a degree awarded for a regular programme from a document awarded as part of a multiple degree. This means that generally a multiple degree is perceived as a combination of several individual degrees.

Erasmus Mundus joint master degrees: The story so far, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6f52e9bb-31f2-11e6-b497-01aa75ed71a1>, p. 37

Dual degree

A double degree is a type of multiple degree but here only two documents are awarded. Double degrees are often referred to in one breath with dual degrees. Where double degrees are awarded by joint programmes, dual degrees are not. Dual degrees are awarded for two programmes separately. These two programmes have some coordination and coordinated elements but, contrary to joint programmes, the curriculum is not integrated and not jointly offered. In case of a dual degree, each institution is primarily responsible for its own curriculum and its own degree. Dual degrees have also been awarded by single institutions offering their students "efficiencies in course taking".

Erasmus Mundus joint master degrees: The story so far, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6f52e9bb-31f2-11e6-b497-01aa75ed71a1>, p. 37

European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

In 2015, the ministers of higher education approved the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA) at the Yerevan conference, with the aim of simplifying European joint programme external review processes. The European Approach defines common standards based on the tools of the European Higher Education Area, without applying any additional national criteria. With this methodology, degrees are assessed in only one of the degree programme's participating countries, with this assessment being recognised by the rest of the countries offering the degree.

<https://www.aqu.cat/en/Universities/Programmes-Assessment/International-interuniversity-programs-European-Approach>

Under the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, a single quality assessment will suffice for programmes to obtain accreditation in all the countries of the European Higher Education Area in which programme accreditation is mandatory. (...) This European approach comprises a single framework with standards and procedures for the assessment of international joint programmes. Such joint programmes, which are taught by institutions in several countries, may carry either a single joint degree or several national degrees.

<https://www.nvao.net/en/european-approach-for-quality-assurance-of-joint-programmes>

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_v_1_0.pdf

Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, p. 34

(<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8672-2025-INIT/en/pdf>)

Legal status

The European Commission launched the European strategy for universities in 2022 where it suggests that European Universities should explore deeper cooperation also in terms of a legal statute. A joint legal entity of the alliance would assist in consolidating strengths, making collective strategic decisions, unifying operation, and facilitating pooling of resources, activities, and data. This would support deeper, long-term, and flexible cooperation by allowing the sharing of capacities, exchange of personnel [...].

A European university legal entity has multiple potential advantages for an alliance. These range from general economies of scale to more strategic benefits. A legal entity can help save costs through joint procurement and centralised services. It can also enable true sharing of resources, most notably through employing staff directly in the legal entity that are serving the entire alliance without ties to partner universities.

The financial aspect is also relevant as the legal entity can assume a role in external funding in e.g. Horizon Europe, where an alliance is normally not eligible as a beneficiary. Some of the alliances have made the legal entity responsible for grant management in EUI and others. The entity can also serve as a centralised fundraising organisation and enable joint investments. It can also function as a handler of internal funding, such as for seed funding for smaller projects.

[European universities and legal entities – why and why not to do it | Laurea Journal](#)