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# ED-AFFICHE

European Degree Label

Comparative analysis of the  
criteria associated to the  
European Degree label and  
the process behind it



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<b>WP leader</b>	WP4
<b>Main author</b>	Raquel Blave Gómez (PhD, Catholic University of Valencia), Laura Colò (ED-AFFICHE Project Officer), Marta Jaworska-Oknińska (PhD, 4EU+ Educational Coordinator), Neringa Narbutiene (EU-CONEXUS Institutional coordinator at Catholic University of Valencia), Jan Potoček (PhD, Charles University)
<b>Contributors</b>	Josef Matoušek (PhD, Charles University), Mirko Varano (Senior Advisor International Projects, KTH Royal Institute of Technology), Kurt Willems (ED-AFFICHE Project Coordinator and Professor at KU Leuven)
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## Introduction to the ED-AFFICHE analysis of the criteria associated to the European Degree label and the process behind it

### About ED-AFFICHE

In 2022, the European Commission (EC) launched a call for European University Alliances to examine and facilitate the delivery of a joint European degree label. The ED-AFFICHE Project consortium, composed of six university alliances (**Una Europa, 4EU+, CHARM-EU, EC2U, EU-CONEXUS, and Unite!**) and 51 higher education institutions (HEIs) from 22 different countries, have secured European support.

In consultations with experts, the ED-AFFICHE consortium will propose possible improvements to the criteria associated with the European degree label and co-develop recommendations on the possible assessment procedure, as well as the design and delivery of a future European Degree label.

Together, the consortium has been successful in securing the **support of 19 national and regional ministries in charge of higher education as well as 15 national accreditation and quality assurance (QA) agencies**. It is the exchange of best practices between those actors and the open dialogue with their universities that carries the real potential to move forward the European Higher Education Area.

### About the Document

This document consolidates perspectives from diverse stakeholders, including **joint programmes directors or coordinators from ED-AFFICHE partner and associated partner universities, national and regional authorities, QA and accreditation agencies, employers, and notably, students and PhD students**. It aims to assess the criteria proposed by the EC concerning the European Degree label.

For each criterion, the authors succinctly present the viewpoints of various stakeholders on its **relevance and feasibility**, wherever available. Additionally, the document includes recommendations for enhancing and refining each criterion as deemed necessary.

More comprehensive and precise recommendations can be formulated once a clear definition of the European Degree and/or European Degree Label is established. This clarification addresses a primary concern expressed by many stakeholders during interviews conducted within the framework of the ED-AFFICHE project.



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## Methodology

To compile this document, diverse surveys were dispatched in September – November 2023 to pertinent stakeholders, honing in on European Degree criteria tailored to each target group.

- The **student survey** was designed to target student communities of all cycles (first cycle, second cycle, long cycle programmes and PhD) from all study fields of ED-AFFICHE partner and associated partner universities. The dissemination strategy was devised to be as comprehensive as possible, so it was translated into 10 languages. The goal of the survey was to verify which criteria, associated to the European Degree Label, present the biggest added value according to the student body, and what is the perceived value of a European Degree Label. The concept of the European Degree Label was strengthened with a dynamic [explanatory video](#). Important to note is that not all criteria from the mandatory and optional lists were assessed by students. A pre-selected list of criteria was presented to student and PhD student communities. It was intentionally concise for heightened participation, and it garnered a substantial **2546 responses**. The respondents, from more than 20 countries, represent 24 study fields, 60% of them study the programme of the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle, 30 % of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 10 % of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle, and only 6.5% study or studied international joint programme. It is worth mentioning that response patterns in this survey exhibited significant variations across countries due to a range of interpretations of the GDPR application, which restricted a massive distribution at universities.
- Similar challenges surfaced when disseminating the **employer survey**, amassing responses with noticeable disparities among represented countries. We received 67 replies, most of them came from Italy and they come from a diversity of business sectors. This survey delved into two primary aspects: rating the criteria and assessing the inherent value of the label.
- These themes were also explored in **survey directed at QA and accreditation agencies**, placing a greater emphasis on their potential role in the overarching process. Sent to the 15 associated agencies within the project, the survey garnered responses from 8 out of the 15 entities queried. One of the reasons we did not receive responses from more agencies could have been the relatively short time frame within which we collected the answers. However, this diverse selection, encompassing agencies from Italy, Romania, Spain, France, Flanders, Cyprus, and Poland, constitutes a substantial and highly informative cross-sectional sample. It offers perspectives not only from individual countries but also from entire regions represented by these agencies and can be indicative of how a given region perceives the particular issue or what experience it has with it.



- The analysis incorporates **feedback from joint programmes directors and coordinators** in WP2, along with insights gathered through consultations with legal experts from partnering countries in WP3. To inquire on the opinion of joint programmes directors and coordinators, a questionnaire has been sent to the 51 universities, associated partners in the consortium. The results have been complemented with **online focus groups**. It should be noted, however, that joint programme coordinators were asked mostly about the mandatory criteria.
- Wherever it is relevant, the analysis draws on the findings of the WP3 deliverable D3.1 **[“Obstacles for Transnational Collaboration in Higher Education”](#)** in order to provide a legal context for the criteria and to reflect whether it is really feasible to meet them.
- Insights from various stakeholders were gathered during the **[ED-AFFICHE mid-term event](#)**, "Syncing Achievements: Collaborative Solutions to Facilitate the Path to the European Degree Label", **held on November 22, 2023**. This event provided ample opportunity for associated partners to express their perspectives and offer recommendations on the European Degree Label, its criteria, and potential verification methods. The viewpoints were documented by rapporteurs within the ED-AFFICHE consortium using a pre-prepared report template. Given the complexity of the topic, the discussion was somewhat guided to ensure meaningful exploration.
- Lastly, the document incorporates parallels with other European Degree Label pilot projects, with a particular emphasis on the insights provided by **[FOCI's report on stakeholder needs analysis and developed evaluation methodology](#)**.

## MANDATORY CRITERIA

### Criterion #1 - Higher education institutions involved

*The joint programme is jointly designed and delivered by at least 2 higher education institutions from at least 2 different EU Member States.*

Most of the stakeholders consider this criterion to be crucial for the establishment of a joint degree, assuring the international experience to the student. That being said, the employers – though overall responding positively to this criterion – do not deem it as the crucial one for them, and value other criteria as more relevant from their point of view. Some programme directors mentioned that focusing on multilateral collaboration rather than bilateral would probably give more relevance to the initiative, also in line with the European University Initiative



and Erasmus Mundus. From the responses received, the conclusion is that this criterion should not be changed.

### Mid-term event

During the mid-term event organized by ED-AFFICHE on 22 November 2023 in Brussels, some participants, however, questioned the phrasing of this criterion. Two somewhat different issues were posed.

- On the one hand, some participants questioned the scope of the European Degree Label and European Degree asking if the initiative should be **limited to the European University alliances**, at least in first instance, as testbeds for the European Degree (Label), thus highlighting the quality of the joint programmes they design and deliver with multiple partners (which is, indeed, different from most existing joint programmes that are often limited to two partners). This was an opinion not shared by all participants, as others stressed that the European Degree Label would not act as an enabler for transnational collaboration in higher education if it is limited solely to the alliances.
- On the other hand, some participants mentioned that the phrasing of the criterion might be unfortunate, as it does not exclude the possibility of (for example) a consortium of Asian or American universities from finding two European partners and receiving a European Degree Label, even though the teaching activities would mostly be set in different parts of the world. They thus ask for a rephrasing of the criterion highlighting the fact that most of the programme needs to be delivered with the **geographical scope** of Europe, which we believe indeed mirrors the aim of the criterion when it was designed. When asked if those participants would like to have the criterion limiting the scope of the European Degree Label exclusively to universities from within Europe, most answered negatively, mentioning that some universities in Europe have close collaborations with (or even campuses in) other countries in the world, and it would be strange to exclude those existing collaborations by definition from the European Degree.

### FOCI Feedback

FOCI's indicators highlight the concept of an "**interinstitutional cooperative structure**", a term that may seem somewhat ambiguous. The question arises as to whether this expression enhances the criterion's clarity or introduces confusion. Specifically, there is uncertainty about whether a board meeting among academics orchestrating the programme satisfies the indicator's requirements, or if a more formalized structure is necessary. The concern is that this criterion might impose an additional layer that could hinder the broader applicability of the





European Degree Label to collaborations beyond alliances. It is worth questioning whether an ad hoc cooperation between two universities would be considered to possess such a "structure".

Additionally, the indicators emphasize the **involvement of various stakeholders in the programme's design**. While there is no objection to this indicator per se, there is a question about its alignment with the current criterion or if it might be more appropriately placed within another criterion addressing the quality of the European Degree Label.

Furthermore, the first indicator stipulates that any institution signing the formal agreement should be considered for this criterion. However, it is crucial to consider the capacity in which these institutions sign. For instance, universities participating in a programme as mobility pathways (without conferring the joint degree) will sign the agreement but should not be included in the minimum count of two institutions specified in the criterion.

### Joint programme directors/coordinators

This criterion holds significant relevance for joint programme coordinators and is already implemented by a substantial majority of joint courses. What is surprising is that 10% of the respondents claim not to apply this criterion to their joint programmes. During the in-depth focus groups, certain individuals expressed the view that there should be **clarity regarding whether these universities should be public or private**.

### Students

The target of the question was not the precise number of HEIs involved, but **how students perceive the fact that a study programme includes a mobility period in at least one foreign university**. Almost 70% of respondents considered this quite a relevant factor when choosing their study programme. This distribution of opinions was similar when the study cycle of the responding students was analysed. 6.5 % of respondents either studied or are studying a programme which may be considered joint (double, multiple, joint, etc.), and 75-85% of them emphasise the added value of this criterion.

However, we could state that about 30% of the responding students, no matter their study cycle, do not see any advantage in having a mobility or international professors, or in their home university collaborating with other international ones.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

The majority (75%) of the QA and accreditation agencies that participated in this survey consider the joint design and high integration of the joint programmes to be important. At least 2 HEIs are a prerequisite for joint programmes. The survey also shows that from the perspective of one

QA, **whether participating HEIs are from EU member states or more broadly from the EHEA is not as crucial.**

### Employers

Out of 67 answers, most respondents (28) stated that this criterion is somehow relevant (number 3 on a 1-5 scale) for them, but also a large number replied that it is relevant (25), and only very few (8) selected the two lowest answers. Overall, 59 out of 67 respondents would deem this criterion as overall relevant for employers. Within the context of all criteria, this one, along with criterion #2 on a joint degree, was the lowest rated one. That is, employers do not regard it as relevant as some other criteria.

Some respondents, in the comments section, stated that any **international experience is always positively perceived**, and that different specializations represented by different institutions conducting the programme is also an added value. For some, however, the quality of the educational offer was more important than the numbers of institutions providing it, as they did not perceive it to be on equal terms; a higher number of institutions does not necessarily equal better quality.

## Criterion #2 - Transnational joint degree delivery

*The joint programme leads to the award of a joint degree.*

*Dissertations are co-evaluated by supervisors or a committee with members from at least 2 different institutions located in 2 different countries.*

Stakeholders hold diverse perspectives on the issuance of a joint degree. While some emphasize its significance for the future of collaborative programmes, navigating legislative constraints proves challenging, as is also evident from the [reports of legal experts from partnering countries \(D3.1\)](#). The processes of awarding the degree, the title itself, and the parchment, are all regulated by country-specific legislation and generate confusion among stakeholders when developing a joint degree programme. All these elements should be properly distinguished, and some joint solutions/approaches proposed to facilitate meeting this criterion, for example, by introducing a **diploma format designed by the European Union** (as Diploma Supplement is proposed now). Acknowledging the pivotal role of criterion #2 from a policy standpoint, we advocate for a **precise definition of the joint degree**. Additionally, emphasis should be placed on **elucidating the enhanced value it brings to students and their career prospects**. Crucially, **the way the European Union (EU) officially recognises and endorses this degree** warrants exploration, given its paramount importance to students.



Finally, if this criterion is deemed mandatory, the EC should exert every effort to optimise the likelihood of its implementation across member states.

### Mid-term event

During the mid-term event, most of our stakeholders mentioned that this criterion is the most difficult one to fulfil yet, but should, nonetheless, remain as mandatory. It is a policy choice to focus the European Degree Label on joint programmes *because* they are the most difficult ones to implement, hoping that this focus will, thereof, facilitate the future implementation. After all, the more universities designing them, the more their institutional framework will have to be adapted, so a larger number of legislators will be confronted with questions from the universities in their country to amend legislation.

The fact that **this criterion needs indicators** was mentioned several times, as joint programme is a term interpreted in many ways. If the idea behind the focus on joint programmes was to facilitate their implementation by amending institutional and legislative frameworks, then the indicators should focus on the delivery of the *degree*, and not only on the jointness of the programme. While most participants expressed openness to the idea of joint degrees being reflected in national degrees, it is essential to clarify that a joint degree transcends a mere compilation of national degrees visually represented on a shared diploma (where "diploma" refers to the parchment listing the degrees). A joint degree is a distinct entity in itself – a singular **qualification acknowledged across all countries of the participating universities**. The indicator should emphasize this unique characteristic.

There were no specific comments on the **second indicator** (need for two supervisors from two institutions for dissertations). The ED-AFFICHE consortium wonders if this indicator, which seems more a curricular regulation than a regulation on the awarding of a joint degree, is in the right place. The indicator could be clearer on the question concerning if the supervisors need to come from the degree awarding universities, or if other institutions are accepted for this indicator as well. Some of the existing joint programmes have more partner-universities than those who award the joint degree to provide students with more mobility paths. Could supervisors from these universities also be considered for this indicator? For the consortium, it makes sense to allow this to share the workload and responsibilities between all partners in the joint degree *programme*, regardless of their status with respect to the joint *degree (diploma)* itself.

## FOCI Feedback

When looking at the FOCI report on stakeholder needs analysis and developed evaluation methodology, the mere existence of a formal agreement signed by the partner institutions explicitly stating the conditions for awarding a joint degree does not clarify whether all the HEIs involved in the Joint Programme are actually expected to issue a joint degree or if this can also be allowed only to a subset of the partners of the consortium. It is also necessary to clearly **differentiate between the jointness of the programme/curriculum and of the certification/qualifications**. The jointness of the programme will be ensured by a number of other suggested mandatory criteria, while this specific criterion clearly refers to the delivery of a joint degree by the concerned HEIs or by the entire consortium.

## Joint programme coordinators/directors

This criterion holds significance, but its application to this category appears more intricate. Only 42.7% of the respondents indicate that they are currently implementing this criterion in their joint programme. While 32.2% state that this criterion is **not feasible due to legal or regulatory barriers at different levels**. Some respondents argue in favour of awarding two or more degrees, considering it a favourable solution.

**Clarification regarding the terminology "awarding the degree" is needed.** Specifically, whether it refers to a full degree or a certificate. It might be important to establish a clear distinction between diploma (parchment) and degree (title/qualification).

Some argue against making this criterion mandatory. Implementing such a mandate is seen as potentially leading to complications in terms of signatures, logos, and administrative intricacies, potentially undermining the intended productivity of initiatives by the EC. There is also a recognition that for regulated disciplines, the criteria may need further development and differentiation.

## Students

It is worth noting that while almost 65% of respondents would **value receiving one single diploma jointly issued by more than one university and endorsed by the EU**, 52.5% of them would prefer being awarded separate diplomas from each of the participating institutions in comparison to only 43% if the joint diploma did not include the European Degree Label.

Asked to project what value a diploma jointly issued by more than one university and endorsed by the EU could embed, 70% indicated the job search in Europe (and only 36% in non-European

countries), followed by 67,5% emphasising a richer CV and 55% - better recognition and visibility of received education.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

Opinions on the international joint diploma vary among the QA and accreditation agencies that participated in the survey. Nevertheless, the majority considers it a relevant or moderately relevant criterion and argues that it is more readable for employers and **important for ensuring the future of joint programmes**. As a counterargument, it is pointed out that the definition in the Joint Approach is broader, allowing for double or multiple diplomas (presumably also diploma supplements).

### Employers

This group of respondents provided a wide range of answers for this particular criterion. Most respondents are somewhere in the middle on this, but still positive: 45 respondents selected that a joint degree is somehow relevant and relevant for them. Overall, the majority – 54 respondents – declared **positive relevance of joint degree** (answer 3 and higher on the scale) for them, but the rest answered rather negatively. In the context of all criteria, this one, as well as criterion #1 on the joint delivery of the programme, was **the lowest rated one**, therefore employers do not deem it as relevant as some other criteria.

In the comments, some remark that the **quality of teaching is more important**, and the content of the educational offer is more important than the diploma itself. That could indicate that, for employers, issuing a joint degree or conducting a joint programme does not equal automatically the higher quality of the educational offer and the programme itself (see replies for criterion #1).

An additional question for employers has been: if these criteria result in certification (either in the form of a Label certificate or a complete university degree), would you view the holder as generally more suitable for a job in your field? The overwhelming majority of respondents supported this, with 44 out of 67 answering affirmatively. 12 respondents expressed a negative view, while 11 found the question unclear. We garnered 30 comments on whether this certification (label or degree) would provide added value for employers, and the responses highlighted various benefits, including:

- It would increase the trust in skills of the graduate and transparency of what is an expertise of such a graduate;
- It would certify enhanced skills and qualifications of the graduate;



- It would be an added value during the job interview if two candidates had equal set of skills – additional baseline in the evaluating process of a candidate;
- Proficiency in multiple foreign languages and international exposure;
- Proof of experience in performing in multicultural environment and language skills;
- A great added value in the training of a professional in the sector with transversal skills and able to welcome and actively face the challenges of the future;
- A certification of quality and international mindset;
- A graduate of a programme certified with European Degree Label or European Degree would be open minded, available to relocate in different country, flexible and proactive more than graduates of national programmes;
- Such a label would guarantee higher standards and higher competitiveness of such programme and its graduates.

However, also some concerns were raised among those who do not believe such a label or degree would bring any added value, such as:

- Quality of one institution is more important;
- Companies are looking for specific skills like tech skills, and not general certification;
- The knowledge basis would be the same, regardless the certification holding;
- Not a lot of trust is placed in certificates;
- Skills and competencies really depend on the person and the certificate would not attest to that, only whether a candidate really presents the particular skillset a company searches for, and it doesn't have to be fostered by such programme.

### Criterion #3 - Transparency of the learning outcomes

*The joint programme is described in ECTS.*

*A joint Diploma Supplement is issued to the student at the end of the joint study programme.*

While transparency of learning outcomes is crucial for pertinent stakeholders, we recommend a more explicit and comprehensible explanation (e.g. adding indicators to assess it).

#### Mid-term event

The mid-term event resulted in little remarks concerning this criterion. The participants often stressed the need of the **European Degree Label to be embedded in the EHEA**. Tools like the ECTS credit system reflect it. The diploma supplement was sometimes mentioned as well as a transparent method to communicate to universities and employers from across the EHEA.

Specifically for the European Degree Label, the **diploma supplement** seems like a logical place where information on the European Degree (as a label, or as a qualification) could be mentioned.

That being said, the ED-AFFICHE consortium has reflected on the question if the label needs to be “awarded” to students since, as long as it is only a label and not a qualification, it is attached to the programme, not to the students following the programme. The ED-AFFICHE project is designing a document/certificate that can be given to students and mirrors the way a diploma looks like. It mirrors a diploma mostly for communication/“branding” reasons: if the European Degree Label is to be launched now, and might make the **transition from label to qualification in the (near?) future**, then why not design a sustainable visual design so that the transition from label to qualification does not render all promotional activities that took place to make the European Degree recognizable loose its value. The one does not necessarily exclude the other: the label can indeed be a first step towards what will eventually be a qualification, leaving more time to deal with the more difficult legal questions that surround the European Degree as a qualification.

The reason why we make that reflection here, under criterion number three, is that IF the label is not awarded/given to the students but only awarded to the programme, then the diploma supplement (which is given to the students due to criterion number three) seems like a logical place to mention that the diploma that was awarded was quality checked through the European Degree Label initiative.

Whether or not such a document/certificate is given to students, as long as the European Degree is a label, remains a policy choice. From a legal point of view, there is no need for it. Factors to be taken into account when making that policy choice include the following:

- If the certificate/label is given to students, this might be confusing (or even misleading). If it is not a diploma, then why is it given to students? The choice we made to take the diploma as a basis for the visual design of the label increases this risk. This was a concern that was specifically raised with some explicit concerns during the mid-term event.
- If the label is not given to students, then the recognizability and the branding of the European Degree might be less successful/impactful.
- If the label is to become a qualification in the future, then it will need to be awarded to students. Awarding the label as well could make the initiative more sustainable from the start.
- From a pragmatic point of view, awarding the label to the programme and mentioning this only in the diploma supplement is certainly the easiest way to launch the European Degree

Label. It does not require any legislative changes as it can (for example) be mentioned in the sector about “additional information”. This would change if the European Degree label were mentioned on the diploma instead of on the diploma supplement.

- The label itself would be another “paper” given to students, which is not necessary for them, and possibly difficult for universities to deliver, as it requires printing out and signing. Digital delivery methods for the label, or digital signatures, would limit this downside for students and/or universities.
- One concern we heard during the mid-term event was that currently all national degrees delivered within Europe (single, double, multiple of joint) can now be considered as “European” degrees, as they are delivered within Europe. In the rest of the world, any degree delivered within Europe would be European. If the concept of European Degree is now launched and restricted to a small number of them, then many degrees might feel they are collateral damage. This concern seems to some point theoretical, but the actual “delivery” of European Degree labels that are given to students does make the concern more visible. One final remark on this that we heard during the mid-term event was that a change of name of the concept could also limit this risk: if the label is a variation of the Erasmus Mundus label (now for all qualification levels and only for joint programmes), then could the name also be a variation of Erasmus Mundus, rather than European Degree?

### FOCI Feedback

This criterion refers mainly to the often unclear learning outcomes when two or more pre-existing national programmes are combined to generate a new international joint programme. The real challenge here is to ensure that the new programme makes explicit what the profile of the graduates will be, which specific competences they will have acquired, and which professions they will have access to. The use of a Joint Diploma Supplement might be a first step in this direction, but these outcomes should be made visible and accessible already at the time of application for the benefit of the applicants.

Grading scales and credit allocation are only marginal components of this item. They are indeed a crucial element of any joint policy within the consortium developing a joint programme. At this point however, requesting “public documents and resources” might be overshooting and pose a threat to the rollout of the European Degree Label. Until generally accepted public grading scales are developed, asking joint programmes to publish their own grading scales to students at the time of enrolment, could already suffice.



## Joint programme coordinators/directors

This group advocates for placing objective learning outcomes at the **forefront of joint degree programme assessment**. They underscore the importance of transparent learning outcomes, particularly in acknowledging ECTS, internships, and safeguarding QA. On the other hand, there is an opinion that the criterion is **not very clear and should be more precisely defined**.

## Students

This criterion was not considered relevant for the target audience of the ED-AFFICHE Student Survey.

## Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

The transparent description of learning outcomes (using ECTS) is absolutely essential in terms of the EHEA and QA requirements. On the other hand, the issuing of a joint Diploma Supplement was not emphasized as a necessary requirement.

## Employers

The criterion holds substantial importance for respondents within the employers group. Notably, none opted for the two lowest responses, with all participants deeming it relevant (scoring 3 or higher on the scale). The majority expressed a belief in its relevance, constituting 31 responses, and within that group, 24 respondents deemed it very relevant. Among employers, it is evident **that transparency of learning outcomes stands out as a crucial and highly valued criterion**.

## Criterion #4 - Quality assurance arrangements

*Internal and external QA is conducted in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). The programme, the study field or the institutions are accredited/evaluated by an EQAR-registered agency.*

*If external quality assurance is required at programme level in the countries involved, the transnational programme should be accredited/evaluated preferably using the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA).*

Criterion #4 emerges as notably pertinent for stakeholders, emphasizing the crucial need for European joint programmes **to undergo assessment at the European level**.

Should this criterion persist as a mandatory one, it is imperative to address the existing hurdles in adopting the **European Approach** as the universal solution. Overall, responses from consultations with legal experts indicate that only three countries (Czech Republic, Italy, Sweden) have explicitly stated their inability to fully embrace the European Approach.



While the European Approach holds potential as a solution for numerous challenges in ensuring the QA of joint programmes, its effectiveness is contingent upon national legislation. Specifically, its success relies on the extent to which it is universally applicable across all HEIs and replaces all country-specific procedures or documents. It's crucial to note, however, that even if the European Approach streamlines certain aspects, obstacles stemming from country-specific legislation governing curriculum, degree issuance, programme governance structures, or diploma/parchment standards may persist.

### Mid-term event

During the mid-term event, the need for robust QA mechanisms was often mentioned. If this label is to be “branded” in the world as qualitative joint programmes that are endorsed as such to attract international students, then the need for those programmes to be qualitative, in its initial accreditation phase, but also afterwards during the rollout of the programme, was a shared focal point. This is all the more true if this message, i.e. that these programmes have been quality checked, if then used towards legislators as a way of convincing them that flexibility of the national legal framework should be considered for European degrees, since the aim of the legislation to organize qualitative programmes is already checked elsewhere.

There was one shared message given by all participants, that the **European Degree Label should fit as tightly as possible within the existing QA frameworks**. The ESG's and the European Approach as mandatory criteria (the latter for initial accreditation for new programmes who still need a programme-based accreditation) makes a lot of sense. That being said, participants did ask to which extent the criteria for the European Degree Label would actually add something new to the criteria of the ESG's and the European Approach. If the aim of the European Degree Label is not only to boost the Bologna tools, but also to avoid unnecessary administrative processes, then a difficult equilibrium needs to be found between (on the one hand) not asking too much new compared with existing QA and accreditation processes (and definitely not the same but in a different manner), while at the same time also asking sufficient new things for the European Degree to be looked at as an initiative with added value.

A final issue often mentioned during the mid-term event was the **costs of accreditation**, as well as the fact that not all countries are making the European Approach possible. This might lead to a policy decision to keep the European Approach in the mandatory criteria for all countries to make sure that the European Approach is feasible, both from a legal point as view as from a practical/financial point of view. That being said, as one of the mandatory criteria, efforts will be needed to make it accessible to all, before the European Degree label can be awarded to any deserving joint programme.



## FOCI Feedback

It is important to avoid duplications with existing internal and external mandatory QA processes and avoid overcomplications in this sense. It is equally important that EQAR registered agencies are involved in the process in case the consortium decides to undertake the European Approach procedure, even if not mandatory for the award of the label. Making the use of the EA mandatory would, for the time being, exclude a very high number of international joint programmes; whether or not this should be avoided is primarily a policy question. Guidelines and standards should be developed to apply for the EA once all the partners of the consortium are in the formal position of applying for the joint accreditation.

## Joint programme coordinators/directors

53.6% of respondents state that their joint programmes meet this criterion. While some respondents acknowledge the potential difficulty of implementation, they believe it is feasible as long as institutions agree on the process. The recommendation is to steer clear of unnecessary **duplications and additional burdens on programme directors**, especially in the context of a bottom-up approach where universities already have their established criteria.

## Students

This criterion was not considered relevant for the target audience of the ED-AFFICHE Student Survey.

## Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

All the QA and accreditation agencies participating in this survey consider **crucial that a joint study programme secures QA on a European level**. This means aligning QA with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). One of the QA agencies specifies that the group of HEIs delivering a joint programme should have a common internal QA system at programme level (in accordance with the ESG).

## Employers

The employers group overwhelmingly considers this criterion highly relevant. A substantial 34 respondents, representing over 50% of the group, rated it as relevant (number 4 on the 1-5 scale), while an additional 24 respondents indicated that it is highly relevant. Impressively, 58 out of 67 employers who participated in our survey believe that **graduating from a programme with European-level QA is either relevant or highly relevant to them**.

In the open feedback section, some scepticism was voiced, contending that not all "European" activities and evaluations are universally useful, successful, or reliable. Notably, only a clear



minority of three respondents selected the two lowest options (1 and 2 on the scale), emphasizing that these dissenting opinions are in the minority.

## Criterion #5 - Joint policies for the joint programme

*The higher education institutions involved have joint policies for admission, selection, supervision, monitoring, assessment and recognition procedures for the joint study programme.*

The establishment of joint policies for a joint programme appears relevant to stakeholders, despite the considerable challenges posed by diverse legislative limitations. A potential solution to this complexity could involve the **issuance of a guiding document by the EC**. This document would provide guidance to member states on addressing joint programmes and offer universities **insights on how to regulate policies** within the consortium agreement, thereby facilitating the alignment of practices across diverse legal frameworks.

To improve clarity, it is suggested to use specific indicators that prompt "yes" or "no" responses when assessing particular policies.

### Mid-term event

During the afternoon session of the mid-term event, the joint policies were heavily discussed. The concept of having joint policies was thought to be essential to every participant present. It is hard to imagine a joint programme without joint policies on these issues to communicate in a clear and transparent manner to students. However, the way in which participating universities are allowed to develop such joint policies depends on the legal framework in each country. Many countries have restrictive legislation on (for example) admission and selection to a bachelor, master or PhD programme. Many countries have curricular regulation on the supervision of master or PhD thesis, etc. Which means that, even though the criterion itself is not questioned, the flexibility universities have to decide on the policy that they find the best guarantee for quality was discussed.

Deliverable 3.1 in the Ed Affiche project provides an overview of the legal barriers that exist for each of the items mentioned in criterion no. 5, as well as for many items that will be dealt with in the consortium agreement, and that hamper universities in the development of their desired joint policy. Depending on the countries involved, some joint programmes will have a lot of room to negotiate joint policies, whereas other joint programmes will find themselves tightly bound when discussing (for example) admission, supervision or assessment methods. The participants thus requested some leniency in the verification of this criterion: the mere existence of joint policies is a must, but under the current variety of legal frameworks, the quality of such policies

will always be determined by what is allowed when putting together all the legal frameworks of the countries involved.

### FOCI Feedback

It should be added that specific bodies need to be appointed at programme level. The selection/admission criteria will match the most restrictive ones present in the consortium, in order for the joint policies to respect the legal framework in all participating countries.

### Joint programme coordinators/directors

60.9% of the respondents affirm that their joint programmes fulfil this criterion. While there is a general appreciation for joint policies, there is also a **need for a more detailed list of expected actions**. It is crucial to take into account **legal disparities between countries**. Notable issues that have surfaced include differences in academic calendars, admission processes, curriculum renewal schedules, thesis formats and tuition fees.

### Students

This criterion was not discussed in the students survey due to possibility that only few of them would know what joint programmes are, which was confirmed by the fact that 52% of the students who responded to the survey did not know what a joint programme is.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

According to QA and accreditation agencies that participated in the survey, all HEIs offering a joint programme should have the same joint policies, with only minor particularities in each one of them. However, concerns were raised about **how to achieve this with different regulations in different countries**.

### Employers

Among the 67 responses received, a significant majority, 59 respondents, viewed this criterion as at least somehow relevant (ranging from somehow relevant to very relevant, corresponding to number 3 and higher on the scale). Notably, 26 respondents, the highest number, specifically marked it as relevant (number 4 on the 1-5 scale), indicating a noteworthy emphasis on its significance. Only 8 respondents opted for the two lowest answers.

In the comments section, two divergent perspectives emerged. One expressed a positive view, emphasizing that **common policies would expedite procedures**, ensure equal qualification for students, and strive for standardization and centralization of programmes across different universities. Conversely, the opposing stance advocated for the maintenance of independent policies within universities.

## Criterion #6 - Transnational campus, access to services

*The joint programme provides enrolled students, regardless of their location, with seamless and free access to the participating HEI's services such as e.g. IT services, shared infrastructure and facilities, (online) library services, faculty development and support, academic guidance and psychological counselling, career advice/mentoring, alumni systems.*

While stakeholders find this criterion generally relevant, it is recommended to **incorporate more specific elements**, such as non-negotiable services like health and well-being support. It is of utmost importance to assure students' rights are respected for all students enrolled in the same programme. In this direction, a recommendation has been received during the ED-AFFICHE mid-term event, concerning the establishment of a **legal forum for students' rights**.

### Mid-term event

During the mid-term event, the criterion of transnational campus was briefly mentioned. On one hand, some participants stressed that full access to all services was **difficult for some of the partner universities**, either because of financial reasons, or because the (digital) infrastructure is insufficiently adapted to accommodate the influx of students in joint programmes, **especially if these students are on short mobility tracks**, and if those students are not enrolled in the university they visit (note: some of the joint programmes chose to enrol students in one university, and register them in (some of) the others).

On the other, some participants also stressed the **issue of students' rights**, which are enshrined in (national/regional) legislation, which may mean that students' rights can be different for students enrolled in the same joint master. Overarching strategies were discussed to tackle this apparent unequal treatment of fellow-students depending on their nationality and/or mobility track. One of the strategies was to **choose one legal forum** (i.e. one applicable legislation) for students' rights, however no conclusion was formulated during the mid-term event (WP 3 of ED-AFFICHE will continue to work on this issue). For the time being, the only thing that can be emphasized here is that **"full access to the universities' services" might be constrained by law** (if the legislation limits the use of those services), **or might be impacted by legislation** (when the legislators makes changes to the minimal facilities students have a right of access to in a specific country), making this a criterion where the consortium agreement and the applicable legal frameworks are closely entangled and may change over time. For that reason, even though more specificity could be helpful to assess this criterion, some caution is also needed when reformulating the criterion or developing indicators for it.

## FOCI Feedback

It would be ideal if students would have access to all the infrastructures and services of all the involved universities throughout the duration of the study programme even when they are not physically present at one or more of the HEIs. If possible, students should also be supported to get access to local/national financial support on the same basis as the local/national students.

As for “free access to digital resources, e-books, academic journals, and other materials needed for study purposes and research”, most institutions/faculties/libraries/... will have **running contracts with publishers**, meaning that offering free digital access to any incoming student might be difficult, especially in the short term.

## Joint programme coordinators/directors

Most respondents, constituting 55.5%, assert that their joint programmes meet this criterion. Some respondents have **recommended more specificity**. Notably, in focus group discussions, the need to ensure attention to health and well-being support for students was underscored.

## Students

Out of all benefits a study programme could have, the students placed **high value on having access to the facilities and services** that can be accessed openly, namely, the accessibility and openness of the campus services offered by other universities (78 % responded to it either positively or very positively, where more than 50% said “Definitely yes”), surpassing the 64% who expressed a preference for being taught by academics from foreign universities.

Apparently, open access and benefits of inter-campus services seem to be more important than the physical mobility itself.

## Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

All respondents agree that it is an **important and essential aspect in terms of the quality of a joint programme**. There was also an opinion expressed that students should be able to engage in short-term mobility (for example, 1 month), possibly covered by Erasmus mobility grants.

## Employers

Most respondents from the employers' group, comprising 59 individuals, indicated the relevance of access to a transnational campus. Specifically, 29 respondents found it somehow relevant, 20 considered it relevant, and 10 deemed it very relevant, while only 8 opted for the two lowest options. It is noteworthy that many respondents fall within the middle spectrum—seeing it as **not crucial but somehow relevant**, as highlighted in one of the comments in the

open section. This suggests a preference for making access to a transnational campus optional rather than mandatory.

## Criterion #7 - Flexible and embedded student mobility arrangements

*The joint programme includes at least 1 period of student physical mobility at another partner institution of at least 30 ECTS.*

*The joint programme includes a total of at least 6 months of physical mobility at another partner institution (including secondment).*

*In addition to physical mobility, the joint programme includes opportunities for doctoral candidates to participate in one or more of these activities at another partner institution: teaching activities, international events, international conferences, joint research scientific projects between partner institutions, joint research publications with researchers from partner institutions.*

The mobility criterion holds paramount importance in a joint programme. Nevertheless, there is a suggestion for **increased flexibility in terms of the duration of such mobility**, accompanied by a need for **contemplation on digital mobility considerations**, especially to address financial issues of certain students to engage in a long mobility. To address legal constraints of some countries related to the delivery of a diploma, it is also recommended to explicit in the criterion that the lack of physical attendance of a student does not prevent a university from delivering a joint degree for that student.

### Mid-term event

During the mid-term event, the student representative spoke of inclusiveness, which is, to a large extent, linked with **the costs of physical mobility and housing**. Students are often restricted to a short-term housing market in a country they do not know, making it both costly and difficult for them to find accommodation. Adding flexibility to this criterion by **accepting digital mobility for (part of) the mobility period might alleviate the financial burden**. Obviously, there can be policy reasons to require physical mobility, nonetheless. During the mid-term event, the question was raised if such policy reason differs between bachelors, masters and PhD's. Overall, the participants who discussed this question seemed to find a **higher need for physical mobility depending on the level of studies** (so more for PhD's, than for masters, or for bachelors). For PhD's specifically, the need to experience different academic settings in real life, was mentioned as crucial.

WP3 (and deliverable 3.1) of ED-AFFICHE did show that, sometimes, the possibility of the joint degree depends on the question of whether the student was physically present in the country.





During the mid-term event, it became clear that some participants found it rather **logical that a joint diploma proves physical attendance in each of the degree awarding institutions**. This was especially mentioned at PhD level, but at other levels this idea also garnered some support. In the current definition of “joint diploma” (at least as the ED-AFFICHE team understands it), this restriction does not make sense. The jointness of a degree delivery should not depend on which universities the student physically resided in. Given the support for this link between physical mobility and joint degree delivery, it makes sense to be more **explicit in the criterion or indicators that the lack of physical attendance of a student does not prevent a university from delivering a joint degree for that student**.

It has been mentioned that concerns about joint degree delivery could be met by requesting each student to either take up a physical course, or a digital course from each of the degree delivering universities. According to the ED-AFFICHE team, this criterion is not recommendable. If the joint programme is truly joint, the joint participation of each degree awarding university in the programme is not necessarily reflected in the organizational structure of single courses: where a course is offered does not necessarily imply that only this institution was involved in the design and delivery of the course (staff mobility, joint preparation of course materials, etc.). As a result, a limitation on joint degree delivery to those students who (digitally or physically) took up a course of the university does not convey the idea of true joint programmes.

### FOCI Feedback

The automatic recognition of the credits earned at each participating university without any supplementary administrative procedure should be granted on top of the obvious 30 ECTS at a second university. There is a need to specify what the students are supposed to perform during their stay abroad period. Teaching periods have usually a duration of 4 months followed by an examination session. It is necessary to provide rules for stays that would, in principle, allow a shorter mobility unless extra-curricular activities are required.

### Joint programme directors/coordinators

A significant 77.7% of respondents confirm that their joint programmes meet this criterion. However, there is a suggestion for **increased flexibility in the minimum requirements**. Additionally, clarity is sought regarding the **definition of mobility**, particularly whether it encompasses online mobility.

### Students

While nearly half of the respondents unequivocally appreciate the opportunity for physical mobility at another partner institution, 15% express a lack of perceived added value in such



physical mobility whilst more than 90% of the students who study or studied joint programmes emphasise it as an important.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

From the perspective of QA, according to all QA and accreditation agencies that responded, joint programmes should incorporate flexible and embedded student mobility arrangements. However, the **suggestion for greater flexibility** was raised twice: in the first case, a proposal was made for the one semester of mobility to be performed in multiple instances and in more foreign partner institutions (in several shorter mobilities), not just in one and all at once. In the second case, it was mentioned that the requirement for a minimum of 30 ECTS, due to the emphasis on physical mobility, precludes the possibility of blended mobility. It was also mentioned that 30 ECTS of physical mobility may also be excessive for 60 ECTS master's programmes.

### Employers

Overall, employers think very positively about embedded physical mobility: 63 out of 67 respondents selected that it is, at least, somehow relevant (number 3 and higher). Most of the replies – 26 out of 67 – stated that it is relevant for the respondents, and 23 – highly relevant. Nobody selected that it is not relevant at all. There was a question of how this mobility is evaluated.

## Criterion #8 - Multilingualism

*During the joint programme, each student is exposed to at least 2 different EU official languages, language classes excluded.*

Although stakeholders acknowledge the importance of multilingualism in a joint programme, there is a recognized **lack of clarity in this criterion**. A suggestion for improvement includes further development, with a recommendation to potentially merge it with optional criterion #2 for enhancement i.e. “the joint programme offers the possibility to take language classes so as to enhance the command of multiple European languages”.

### Mid-term event

During the mid-term event, no real objection against this criterion emerged. If multilingualism raises the bar for European Degree (label) programmes, then this appears to be a desired difficulty for most of the participants. A concern was, however, raised for **same-language regions**, where (for example) Austria and Germany could feel restricted to offer European Degrees together without integrating a second language in the curriculum, whereas other partnerships can offer single-language curricula when the language spoken in their countries (and thus the language the student is exposed to) differs.

Specifically for PhD's, it has been emphasized that it should remain possible to write the PhD thesis in one language, especially if the PhD students published a monography instead of a number of articles.

### FOCI Feedback

The fact that students should take courses in different languages is not what the EC envisaged at first. Clarity is needed on this criterion more than on any others. Forcing consortia to teach in different languages might reduce the attractiveness of the joint programme. Initially, the fact that students are studying in two or more different countries where different languages are spoken would be enough to consider that they are exposed to different languages. A compromise could be to foresee **extracurricular activities in the local language**. It is not clear what the EC means with the fact that language courses are not included in the provisions of this criterion.

### Joint programme directors/coordinators

A total of 48.6% of respondents confirm the implementation of multilingualism in their joint programme. While it is regarded as relevant and in line with the core values of the programme, there is noted **ambiguity in its formulation**, particularly surrounding the term "exposed". Clarification is essential to articulate the expectations and standards tied to this criterion. Additionally, it is suggested that this criterion may be discouraging for some students, leading to a recommendation that it should not be mandatory.

### Students

Almost 17% of respondents would not give any **added value to multilingualism** in their study programmes. On the other hand, almost 65% of respondents did regard multilingualism as a **decision-making factor when choosing a study programme**. 20% of students who study or studied joint programme did not consider multilingualism an important or essential part of the curricula. The possibility to learn a second language looked **the least appealing to the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle (PhD) students**.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

The criterion is supported by 62.5% of respondents. One issue has been mentioned in this regard: in the case of the joint programmes (study areas) which are taught completely in English and in the case of the countries where the main language is English (Ireland, Malta) it would be problematic to impose this requirement.



## Employers

This criterion emerges as of the **utmost importance for employers**, with a significant majority of 57%—38 out of 67 respondents—deeming it highly relevant (number 5 on the scale). No other criterion within this group achieved such a high rating. Notably, none of the respondents dismissed its relevance entirely. Eighteen respondents found it relevant, seven considered it somehow relevant, and only four deemed it as not truly relevant. In summary, a total of 63 respondents affirmed the significance of multilingualism, selecting a rating of 3 or higher, with the majority opting for the highest rating of “highly relevant”.

## Criterion #9 - Innovative learning approaches

*The joint programme includes embedded interdisciplinary and/or intersectoral components using student-centred and/or challenged-based approaches.*

Incorporating innovative approaches into joint programmes eligible for the European Degree Label could serve as **a significant added value for applicants**. Nevertheless, this criterion also requires more precise definitions and specifications regarding the assessment of the development of these approaches. To address this, a recommended approach involves **collaborating with employer associations** to suggest these approaches.

## Mid-term event

The idea of any legislator (including the EC) interfering in the methods of teaching, was viewed by some participants as undesirable. It was said that the **pedagogics of teaching should not be a political matter**. In some countries, this is protected by a constitutional freedom of education. The criterion of innovative learning approaches, without further indicators, can be instrumentalized by the actors that will eventually verify the criteria to award the label in a way that interferes with this freedom in an undesirable way. The participants thus questioned what the criterion was really about. **If the idea was to enforce interdisciplinarity, then the phrasing of “innovative learning” is perhaps too vague**. Interdisciplinarity has to do with the learning outcomes, not really with learning approaches. If the idea was to focus on **student-centred approaches**, then this is fully in line with the ESG’s (and thus – hopefully – not innovative for most universities). Participants questioned if it makes more sense to push some of the **European values** (green, inclusive, respect for diversity, etc.) as minimum standards for the curriculum, **rather than innovativeness**.

## FOCI Feedback

As the FOCI indicator specifies the specific teaching formats that are encouraged or requested, the same concern as in the paragraph above could be raised here. Student centred approached



are of course in line with the ESG's, and soft skills as learning outcome are acceptable. But is it a good idea for any government to determine how teachers should interact with their students during their classes?

### Joint programme directors/coordinators

A substantial 56.8% of respondents assert that their joint programmes embrace innovative learning approaches, seen as an **additional asset for these programmes**. Nevertheless, there is a voiced need for **precise definitions and assessment criteria** to guarantee the effective implementation of these approaches.

### Students

More than 40% of respondents consider the use of non-traditional, innovative teaching methodologies as an **essential part of their learning process**, with another 30% who think that applying them would make a study programme more “quality” and attractive. Only for 3% of respondents this criterion would not play any role in choosing their studies.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

According to all respondents, this criterion is relevant (for 62.5% of them is even essential) from the perspective of QA, and it should be required. It was mentioned once that although innovative learning approaches may not be a feature of each joint programme, it should be a requirement for a European degree label.

### Employers

The significance of this criterion is evident, with most respondents emphasizing its importance. Specifically, 31 respondents rated it as relevant (number 4 on the scale), and an additional 22 respondents deemed it highly relevant. 65 out of 67 employers who participated in the survey considered this criterion to be at least somehow relevant to highly relevant, selecting a rating of 3 and higher on the scale. In the comments, there was even a positive offer suggesting that the **company could contribute to structuring and implementing these innovative learning approaches**. This proposal highlights the potential for collaboration with the business sector to enhance the relevance of this criterion for employers.

## Criterion #10 – Graduate outcomes

*The joint programme has a system to monitor graduate outcomes. This system can be at the level of the programme or institutional level(s).*

While stakeholders acknowledge the relevance of this criterion, there is a recognized need for a **clearer definition and recommendations** on how to monitor the graduate outcomes. A suggested solution involves the creation of a **guiding document** at a European level for Higher

HEIs engaged in joint programmes. This document could offer guidance on monitoring graduate outcomes, emphasizing those most crucial for the sustained success of such programmes.

### Mid-term event

During the mid-term event, what was exactly needed for this criterion to be fulfilled was put into question. The participants felt that most universities have monitoring systems in place, either at programme or institutional level. As such, the criterion seems to add little (as a result, was thus not controversial). One concern that was raised however, was that **employability should, perhaps, not be too strictly defined**. After all, all countries/universities have certain programmes that are struggling to attract a sufficient number of students, often because labour market prospects are not very promising. Nonetheless, most countries feel there is value in keeping those programmes alive. **Collaborating in an alliance** could enhance the sustainability of these programmes by jointly offering them. This approach would reach a minimum threshold of students, justifying both the teaching workload and financial investment. If, however, employability is too strictly defined and monitored, universities will not dare to venture on this (time-consuming) path of developing these programmes jointly.

### Joint programme directors/coordinators

Approximately 50.9% of respondents affirm that this criterion is already integrated into their joint programme. Nonetheless, there is a recognized need for a more **refined definition and specific recommendations** on the process for conducting this check.

### Students

This question was not considered relevant for the target audience.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

All respondents agreed that this is a highly relevant criterion. It was mentioned, for example, that the **feedback received from graduates allows to adjust the settings of the joint programme**, learning outcomes, student services, etc. The concern was raised that if employment rates are to be part of the system to monitor graduate outcomes, it could be challenging for HEIs consortia.

### Employers

The majority, with 29 respondents, concurred that this criterion holds relevance, indicated by their choice of number 4 on the scale. In contrast, only 9 respondents opted for the two lowest options. Additionally, 14 respondents each found it somehow relevant and very relevant.



Overall, a substantial number of respondents, 58 in total, expressed **positivity toward this criterion** by selecting a rating of 3 or higher on the scale.

## Criterion #11 – Inclusiveness and sustainability

*The joint programme commits to wide participation through socially and geographically inclusive admission through tailored measures for all categories of disadvantaged students.*

*The joint programme commits to respect the principles of the European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers and commits to the principles of the MSCA Green Charter.*

Stakeholders highly value this criterion, as they also believe it **embodies the European values** that should define the European Degree label. Article 2 and 3 of the [Lisbon Treaty](#) and the [EU Charter of Fundamental rights](#) can form the inspiration to formulate such Europeanness and harmonizing the (content of) curricula in a manner that could be acceptable to all without overstepping into the EU competences.

Another recommendation is to establish a **guiding document at the European level for assessing the effectiveness of this criterion**.

### Mid-term event

During the mid-term event, the added value of European Degree (labels) was discussed. One way of “branding” them is to **emphasize their “Europeanness”**. Certain **values are essential to the EU** (respect for diversity, sustainable development, etc.) and **should be explicitly listed as mandatory criteria** to award the European Degree (label).

### Joint programme directors/coordinators

A significant 62.3% of respondents indicate that their programme reflects the principles of inclusiveness and sustainability. There is a suggestion to reformulate this criterion to adopt a **broader and more comprehensive approach**. Furthermore, it is advisable to develop a method for **measuring and assessing the effectiveness of this criterion**.

### Students

In selecting a study programme, inclusiveness would be a decisive factor for 65% of respondents. Additionally, 65% consider **civic engagement critical**, while 60% emphasize the importance of **sustainability in their decision-making process**.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

Commitment to inclusivity and sustainability is an important criterion for all the respondents as it is included in the ESG, for 62,5% is even essential (very relevant). It was also mentioned once



that if HEIs state that they declare to European commitments (charter) in this area, then, it becomes more relevant for QA.

### Employers

The employers overwhelmingly rated this criterion positively. A total of 65 out of 67 respondents selected a rating of 3 or higher on the scale, indicating that sustainability and inclusivity are deemed relevant (ranging from somehow relevant to highly relevant) for them. Among these, 27 respondents marked it as highly relevant, and 26 as relevant. Importantly, **none of the respondents indicated that this criterion lacks relevance**, underscoring its significance for employers alongside fostering multilingualism and digital skills.

## OPTIONAL CRITERIA

The EC should elaborate on the role of optional criteria, as stakeholders currently **lack clarity on their utilisation**. Some recommendations have been made on whether some of these optional criteria might be **integrated into the mandatory ones**. Additionally, it is crucial to ensure that the European Degree Label serves to **facilitate the development of joint programmes** rather than imposing additional burdens on interested parties.

During the mid-term event, the overall role and purpose of the optional criteria was discussed by several participants. Most stressed that the general sentiment of programme directors (to make the criteria less strict, and thus to rather move criteria from mandatory to optional instead of the other way around) should not necessarily be followed by the EC. The idea of a “desired difficult”, mentioned already a couple of times above, emerged here, with participants indicating that some of the criteria should be difficult to achieve, otherwise the European Degree will not be an enabler for change. Questioned about what change the European Degree should aim to achieve, the European Approach and Bologna tools were often mentioned, as well as European values being embedded in the working of universities. The former are, indeed, already part of the mandatory criteria (and should remain there, according to most participants in the mid-term event), whereas the latter are partially among the optional criteria and should, perhaps, be shifted towards the mandatory criteria.

Overall, most participants also saw opportunities to join some of the optional criteria with a mandatory criterion, thus limiting the list of criteria. Both multilingualism and employability offer an opportunity to do so.

In this section, the opinions of joint programme directors and coordinators have not been expounded upon for all optional criteria. More information about this category will be part of





the ED-AFFICHE D2.2, “Consolidated report on outcomes of European Degree criteria mapping exercise”.

## Optional Criterion #1

*In addition to physical mobility, the joint programme includes additional formats of transnational learning activities with partner higher education institutions (e.g. online or blended, in the format of regular or intensive courses, summer/winter schools).*

Views on this criterion varied significantly. It could potentially be integrated into the mandatory criterion #7, which pertains to flexible and embedded student mobility arrangements.

### Mid-term event

This item was hardly discussed during the mid-term event. Overall, participants seemed to agree that it was self-evident that joint programmes would offer online/blended teaching formats jointly, as this is why they deserve to award the degree jointly, regardless of the mobility track of the students in the programme.

### Students

While this criterion was not explicitly addressed in the students' survey, it is worth mentioning that 89.21% of respondents expressed a desire for their study programme to provide opportunities for practical experience, such as seminars.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

Most respondents (87.5%) consider this criterion to be important, even essential (very relevant) for 62.5% of respondents. The following reasons were mentioned: it helps to reinforce the strength of the consortium; it improves the integration of joint programmes; it helps to **include students who cannot be physically mobile**.

### Employers

Responses to this criterion were diverse and did not demonstrate the same positivity observed for embedded physical mobility. Among the respondents, 48 individuals indicated it as somehow relevant or relevant (numbers 3 and 4 on the scale), with an additional 12 deeming it very relevant. On the other hand, 7 respondents chose the two lowest responses. Interestingly, in the comments, there was a suggestion that a company could assist in **organizing these e-learning activities**, offering insight into potential collaborations with the business sector.

## Optional Criterion #2

*The joint programme offers the possibility to take language classes so as to enhance the command of multiple European languages.*

This criterion could be relevant and **complete the mandatory criterion #8**, which is considered vague by the interested stakeholders. This criterion is especially relevant for employers.

### Mid-term event

The principle of multilingualism as such was not questioned during the mid-term event (see above), even if there were some concerns on the practical phrasing thereof. Whether or not this optional criterion requires universities to offer language classes within the curriculum of the joint programme, or whether it suffices that students are allowed to take language classes on top of their regular degree programme without having to re-enrol and re-pay another tuition fee) was, however, not clear to the participants (nor was there a shared opinion between the discussants if programming language classes in any joint programme would make sense from a QA point of view).

### Students

This criterion was not asked per se in the students' survey. Nevertheless, when asked about the relevance of studying in a second language, 35,71% of respondents either did not find it relevant or barely relevant, not even all respondents from joint study programmes marked the possibility to learn a new language as an advantage of the programme among the others.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

With one exception, all the QA and accreditation agencies that answered the survey highly support the idea that students during their course of study should have the opportunity to take language classes to enhance their command of multiple European languages.

### Employers

This criterion, complementary to mandatory criterion #8 on multilingualism, was as well highly valued by employers. 52 out of 67 respondents replied positively (26 for relevant) or very positively (26 for highly relevant) to the proposal of fostering multilingualism skills via language classes. Nobody thought that this was irrelevant and only 4 respondents replied that it was not really relevant (number 2 on the 1-5 scale). Overall, 63 out of 67 respondents are positive about this criterion (number 3 and higher on the scale).

As multilingualism criterion is proposed to be mandatory but in the end it was not clear to many respondents and it specifically excluded language classes, we would recommend including language classes as one of the means to incorporate multilingualism in the study programmes.

## Optional Criterion #3

*The joint programme supports future labour market needs and/or includes cooperation with businesses and sectors in its curriculum.*

Collaboration with businesses and sectors for joint programmes is considered an important added value especially for students and employers.

### Mid-term event

During the mid-term event, some participants stressed that academic education is not vocational training, nor professional education. Although employability and labour market needs are undoubtedly relevant and important, they should **not be the only logic on which decisions are taken when offering academic degree programmes**. Specifically for joint programmes, some participants emphasised that precisely those programmes with limited student enrolment due to small labour market needs could benefit from being jointly offered in a cooperation between different universities and countries, thus encompassing a larger labour market, while universities are able to rationalise their efforts by acting jointly instead of in parallel to each other. For this reason, labour market needs should not be interpreted too restrictively (in the sense of, only for those programme where large labour market needs exist) when assessing the criteria for the European Degree.

### Students

A significant 92.95% of respondents deem this criterion crucial (considering it as essential or very important) when selecting a study programme. Notably, both bachelor and master's students, with approximately 80% marking it as "essential" or "important," underscore the **importance of programme relevance to labour market needs**. This sentiment is echoed by 70% of Ph.D. students, for whom studies and research hold a more fundamental purpose.

When considering these findings alongside the students' tendency to associate the European degree label with enhanced employability opportunities, particularly within Europe, there is a compelling **argument for classifying this criterion as mandatory**.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

All the QA and accreditation agencies that participated in the survey consider this criterion to be relevant. For 62,50% of them, it is even essential (very relevant). It was mentioned once that following the ESG, **stakeholders from the professional field should be also involved in designing** of the learning outcomes and curriculum of the joint programme.



## Employers

This criterion was highly valued by the respondents from this group – 28 of the respondents (48%) selected that it is highly relevant, and 21 (31%) that it is relevant for them to include in the study programme **support for cooperation with business sectors** and take into consideration future labour market needs. Only 3 respondents chose the two lowest options, so overall 64 out of 67 respondents are positive about this criterion (selected at least number 3 on the scale, so somehow relevant).

## Optional Criterion #4

*The joint programme provides opportunities for international professional internships/work based learning recognised through the award of ECTS.*

Collectively, the stakeholders engaged in our analysis concur on the significance of this criterion, positioning it as a potential **distinguishing feature for the European degree label**. Consideration might be given to incorporating criteria #3 and #4 alongside the existing mandatory criteria.

## Joint programme directors and coordinators

A faction within this group asserts that internships and collaborative opportunities with businesses and sectors **should be incorporated into the mandatory criteria**. This enhancement to the European Degree Label would confer additional value, ensuring practical experience for the students.

## Students

89,21% of respondents would appreciate their study programme offering opportunities to gain practical experience, i.e. internships, seminars, networking, etc. There is no difference by the respondents of bachelor or master students, and only slightly less (85%) evaluated by PhDs. After having received such an important message from students, **giving more importance to employability as a European Degree Label market characteristic is worth considering**. This criterion interrelates with the previous one about labour market needs, and both were strongly demanded by the student respondents. These criteria may be merged to include a diversity of practical experience throughout the study programme.

## Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

With one exception, all the QA and accreditation agencies that participated in the survey consider this criterion to be highly relevant.

## Employers

This optional criterion seems **as one of the most highly valued by the employers**. 56 out of 67 respondents stated that it is relevant (28) or highly relevant (28) for them that the programme



provided opportunities for international internships and/or work-based learning. In the comments some respondents stated that even a 6-month internship should be a part of the curriculum, and that some companies are more than happy to host such opportunities for international students.

## Optional Criterion #5

*The joint programme includes a career development plan devised with the candidate and/or exposure to the non-academic sector (such as internships, seminars, networking).*

Optional criteria #3 and #4 received high appreciation from students and, to a somewhat lesser degree, from employers. As mentioned earlier, there is potential to **consolidate these criteria with similar ones and convert them into a mandatory criterion**. This would emphasize the consortia's or alliance's ability to offer career development services, along with a range of practical experience opportunities and enhanced collaboration with stakeholders in the labour market.

### Students

As above-described optional criteria related with employability, this criterion gained similar support from respondents: 89,21% of them would appreciate their study programme offering opportunities to gain practical experience, i.e. internships, seminars, networking, etc.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

75% of respondents believe that a career development plan should be included in the joint programme. One respondent mentioned that it is important for joint programmes to focus on a clear objective. In contrast, it was pointed out that this criterion is not included in the ESG and only becomes relevant for QA when a joint programme introduces itself.

### Employers

This optional criterion was overall very positively assessed by employers, but not as high as the criterion concerning business internships. The most selected answer was that it was relevant for the stakeholders (26 so 39% of the respondents). For 24 respondents, highly relevant, while for the rest it is either of little relevance or somehow relevant (number 2 and 3 on the scale).

## Optional Criterion #6

*The joint programme includes components and actions related to environmental sustainability and implements measures to minimise the environmental footprint of its activities.*

Stakeholders analysed in this context deem this criterion pertinent. The development of a **guiding document at the European level could facilitate uniform** understanding of the principle among universities.



## Mid-term event

During the mid-term event, there seemed to be a consensus that this criterion showcases a **fundamental value of the EU** and could thus be shifted to the mandatory list to emphasize the Europeanness of the European Degree (label). The participants did stress, however, that sustainability should not be constructed too narrowly: it is a concept much larger than solely limiting (for example) physical mobility through flights or limiting paper consumption.

## Students

A significant majority of respondents, comprising 60.09%, consider this criterion important or essential when selecting a study program. Conversely, 39.91% of respondents find it either irrelevant or only slightly important.

## Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

The incorporation of actions and measures related to environmental sustainability does **not carry significant relevance** for over a third of those surveyed, as it is not included in ESG. Reportedly, it would become more relevant if HEIs state that they adhere to environmental sustainability.

## Employers

This criterion, complimentary to mandatory criterion number 11 on sustainability and inclusiveness, is very **highly valued by employers**. Almost half of the respondents (48%, 32 answers) stated that this is very relevant for them. The second most frequently selected option was that this is relevant (21 answers). Only 3 respondents selected the two lowest options. In the comments section, concerns have been voiced that some industries, including, for example, the automotive sector, are experiencing difficulties in this respect, while others, on the contrary, have found sustainable production and environmental care to be in the line of business goals.

## Optional Criterion #7

*The joint programme includes components and actions related to the development of high-level digital skills of students, it offers high quality digital education content, as well as assessment of student skills.*

Ensuring the inclusion of digital skills in a curriculum holds paramount significance, **especially for students and employers**. While implementing this universally across all universities in the EHEA may pose challenges, issuing a guiding document at the European level could provide direction to institutions on how to achieve this objective.

## Mid-term event

None of the participants seemed to question the relevance of the criterion, which means it **could be shifted to the mandatory list**. Although the criterion has an impact on teaching methods (which most participants thought should not be the aim of the Commission to determine), the phrasing of the criterion focuses on the learning outcomes instead of on the teaching methods, which seems like the right approach according to most participants.

## Students

73.72% of respondents consider this criterion **essential or important** when selecting their study programme. Analysing the opinions of students in the context of all optional criteria, 39,13 % of students highlighted the expectation that the programme helps to develop high-level digital skills, and it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> best rated optional criterion after #3 and #4 (career oriented).

## Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

For 75% respondents this criterion is relevant. But some of the respondents also mention that in the context of joint programmes, learning, teaching, and assessment methods often take place in a hybrid form, which already serves as an indicator of students' digital skills.

## Employers

This criterion undeniably stands out as **one of the most crucial for employers**, likely following closely after multilingualism. Out of 67 respondents, 56 emphasized the significance of fostering digital skills, with 28 considering it relevant and another 28 deeming it highly relevant. Only 8 respondents found it somewhat relevant, and merely 3 selected the two lowest options. A comment received emphasized the high value placed on digital skills for new graduates.

## Optional Criterion #8

*The joint programme offers the possibility for students to participate in activities promoting democratic values and addressing societal needs of the local community(ies), including volunteering, and to receive ECTS for it.*

While coordinating these activities might pose challenges, it is advisable to establish a European perspective for this criterion.

## Joint programme directors and coordinators

A stakeholder within this group proposes the inclusion of "**education to European citizenship**" in this criterion. Such an addition would be a valuable enhancement for the label, offering a unique dimension that aligns with the distinctive educational context provided by Europe.

## Students

While 34.49% of respondents give little, or no value, to this criterion, 73.72% of them find it important when choosing a study programme. Nevertheless, the comparative analysis of optional criteria suggests that students give **less priority to extracurricular and/or ECTS evaluated civic engagement activities than to employability-oriented ones.**

## Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

For 75% of the respondents this criterion is important. One of the QA and accreditation agencies, whose position in the survey was neutral, mentioned that this criterion would become more relevant if it was supported by HEIs and/or if it was included in the ESG.

## Employers

Overall, this group responded positively to this criterion. The most frequently selected option was that it is relevant (24 respondents selected answer number 4 on the scale) for students to participate in activities promoting democratic values and addressing societal needs of the local community(ies). 6 respondents selected the two lowest answers. Overall, 62 out of 67 respondents stated that this criterion is at least somehow relevant to highly relevant for them (selected number 3 or higher on the scale).

## Optional Criterion #9

*The higher education institutions offering the joint study programme conducts joint promotion and awareness-raising activities to ensure visibility of the joint programme and provide the necessary information about it for students and other relevant stakeholders such as future employers.*

Criterion #9 is relevant for the stakeholders, however it is recommended that the EC takes the lead in promote the concept of the European Degree Label internationally.

## Mid-term event

The idea of “branding” the European Degree was mentioned several times during the mid-term event. Although it was clear that those institutions offering the programme should promote it, most participants also expressed the wish that the **EC would undertake action to promote this new concept of European Degree (label) internationally**, as such a high-level campaign to attract international students would be an added value to the European Degree, and a potential answer to the question “what will the European Degree do that the Erasmus Mundus Masters are not doing already”?



### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

All the QA and accreditation agencies that participated in the survey consider this criterion to be relevant, even essential (very relevant) for 62,50% of them. It was mentioned once that from a QA perspective the promotion of joint programmes is less relevant than providing necessary information for students and other stakeholders, because only the latter is part of the ESG requirements.

### Employers

This criterion seems to be **relevant to employers**. Out of 67 replies, 34 so over 50% stated that this is relevant to them (number 4 on the scale) and 8 selected very relevant. Nobody selected the lowest answer. 62 out of 67 respondents replied overall positively (selected number 3 or higher on the scale) for the relevance of this criterion. It would clearly seem helpful to employers if the visibility of such programmes was raised and promoted.

## STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE OVERVIEW

### Joint programme directors/coordinators

Among the mandatory criteria, joint programme directors/coordinators select **criteria #1 (HEIs involved), #3 (transparency of the learning outcomes) and #5 (joint policies for the joint programme) as the most feasible and important criteria.**

The first criterion stands out, as a significant majority of programmes have already implemented it. However, intriguingly, 10% of respondents indicate not applying this criterion to their joint programmes. During in-depth focus groups, discussions unfolded, emphasizing the need for clarity on whether participating universities should be public or private institutions.

Moving on to criterion 3, there is a strong advocacy for placing transparent learning outcomes at the forefront of joint degree programme assessment. This includes considerations such as ECTS acknowledgment, internships, and the assurance of quality standards.

Criterion 5, although met by 60.9% of the programmes, calls for a **more detailed list of expected actions**. The intricacies of legal differences between countries in academic calendars, admission processes, curriculum renewals, thesis formats, and tuition fees need careful consideration.

Concerning **the least feasible and relevant criteria for joint programme directors/coordinators**, attention is needed on **criterion #2 (transnational joint degree delivery)**. Despite holding significance, it poses implementation challenges, with only 42.7% currently applying it. About 32.2% cite its infeasibility due to legal or regulatory barriers, prompting some to argue against its mandatory status.

**Criterion #4 (QA arrangements)**, met by 53.6%, triggers concerns about potential complications in administrative aspects, leading to reservations about making it mandatory.

**Criterion #8 (multilingualism)**, while implemented by 48.6%, is marred by ambiguity in its formulation. Some suggest reevaluating its mandatory nature, expressing concerns that it might discourage certain students.

Other features which may need attention are:

- Criterion #6 (transnational campus – access to services), met by 55.5%, prompts calls for more specificity.
- Criterion #7 (flexible and embedded student mobility arrangements), with a substantial 77.7% compliance, raises discussions on flexibility in minimum requirements and a need for clarity regarding the definition of mobility.
- Criterion #9, embraced by 56.8%, underscores the importance of innovative learning approaches, with a concurrent call for precise definitions and assessment criteria.
- Criterion #10 (graduate outcomes), integrated by approximately 50.9%, highlights the need for a more refined definition and specific recommendations.
- Criterion #11 (Inclusiveness and sustainability), reflected by 62.3%, prompts recommendations to reformulate and develop a method for measuring and assessing its effectiveness.

## Students

Students would value the flexibility **to personalise their individual student plan** the most (weighted average of 4.34 in the scale from 1 to 5). Although this aspect was not directly covered by any of the proposed criterion, we consider that it should be the guiding attitude towards international cooperation.

Out of all mandatory criteria, the students who took the survey highlighted **transnational campus** benefits and the access to facilities of other universities (library, digital services, career guidance, e-learning platforms, etc.) (Criterion #6, weighted average 4.18).

**Innovative learning approaches** was the third most voted feature (Criterion #9 of joint programmes (weighted average 4.51).

Other criteria were either not analysed (not deemed relevant for students) (#3, 4, 5, etc.), or did not reach weighted average of 4 (#1, 2, 7, 8, 10), which shows less relevance from the students' perspective.

**Graduate outcomes** (Criterion #10) **were not included** into the students' survey since we did not find it relevant for the target audience; students are not the ones tracking graduate outcomes. Nonetheless, the students survey revealed their priority and expectations towards better employability after **graduating from a joint programme and receiving one joint diploma endorsed by the EU** (Criterion #2, weighted as 2,59 out of 3, or 65% of respondents indicated it valuable).

Prioritising the study programmes with embedded university-industry cooperation and hands on experience, (Optional Criterion #3 and #4), with the help of career guidance services (Optional Criterion #5), would lead to a better career prospect. The latter implies updating or proposing a new minimum criterion attached to employability enhancing curriculum and career support.

The focus on the development of high-level digital skills is the last Optional criterion which stands out (weighted average of 4.02) from the rest of optional criteria.

Therefore, while planning the branding and communication of the EDL to the student body, the added value on an international career should be strengthened while emphasising its importance in the description of the EDL concept through criteria.

### Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

Among all the criteria, QA and accreditation agencies considered two as the most relevant ones: **transparency of the learning outcomes** (Criterion #3) and **QA arrangements** (Criterion #4). For the respondents, a transparent description of learning outcomes using ECTS is essential, as well as ensuring the **QA of joint programmes at the European level**, which among other things means aligning QA with the ESG. In both cases, 7 out of 8 respondents rated this criterion as very relevant (number 5 on a 1-5 scale).

Furthermore, among the most relevant criteria from the perspective of QA and accreditation agencies are **joint policies** for admission, selection, supervision, monitoring, assessment, and recognition procedures for the joint programme (Criterion #5), **transnational campus** (Criterion #6), and a **system to monitor graduate outcomes** (Criterion #10).

Among the criteria, **transnational joint degree delivery** (Criterion #2) emerges as the least relevant, according to the overall responses. However, only half of the respondents viewed it as irrelevant or just moderately relevant, while the other half found it to be very relevant. It was pointed out by the first group that the definition in the Joint Approach is broader, allowing for double or multiple diplomas. Second lowest scoring criterion was **fostering digital skills**

(optional criterion #7), but again, the responses varied significantly and still for 75% respondents this criterion was relevant.

Only in 10.63% of all responses rates any criterion as moderately relevant (number 3 on a 1-5 scale), and only in 3.75% of all responses considers any criterion as irrelevant (number 1 or 2 on a 1-5 scale). This indicates that **the majority of criteria (whether mandatory or optional) were considered relevant or even highly relevant** (57.50% of all responses) by most respondents. At least in four cases (criteria related to democratic values, sustainability, inclusivity, and career development), it was mentioned that a particular criterion would become more relevant from the perspective of QA if it was included in ESG and/or if it was adhered to by HEIs.

For half of the respondents, **the distinction between mandatory and optional criteria appears to be beneficial**. The mentioned benefits include enabling consistent application of criteria, providing more flexibility to HEIs, and helping distinguish fundamental criteria that a joint programme must meet to be eligible for the Label from other aspects that institutions may highlight to make their joint programme stand out in terms of quality and relevance. As a counterargument, it was stated that optional criteria do not help the assessment procedure—all criteria in the list should be equally relevant and should encompass all the key aspects of the programme and its implementation conditions.

37.50% of all the respondents stated that some criteria are missing from the list, namely:

- criteria related to research;
- criteria including a clearer link between the European Approach and the European Degree Label;
- criteria related to ensuring an appropriate staff to carry out the education process;
- criteria related to the assessment of students' abilities to acquire the learning outcomes;
- criteria related to the transparency and effectiveness of the internal QA system, including the management of information about the joint programme and the results achieved by students;
- reference to the European Qualifications Framework (or the qualifications frameworks of the countries participating in the joint programme);
- criteria related to the inclusion of intercultural competencies development in the curriculum;
- requirements for components and actions related to the development of global citizenship, equity and inclusion, and democratic values, which should all be considered as key learning outcomes;



- when designing a joint programme, the perspective of key stakeholders should be considered.

When asked about **the role of QA and accreditation agencies in the process of awarding the European Degree Label**, 6 out of 8 respondents stated that **the EQAR-registered agencies should assess the fulfilment of the criteria** for the HEIs in their jurisdiction and in other EHEA countries. The two remaining agencies did not dismiss the possibility. It was also mentioned that the procedure should be **in line with the European Approach**, and it should be similar, recognizable and valid for all countries. One of the respondents emphasized the need to establish a collaboration platform between the agencies involved in granting the European Degree Label and to ensure a workforce that is adequately prepared to participate in this process.

## Employers

Out of all the mandatory and optional criteria, employers valued most highly the criterion on **multilingualism** (mandatory criterion #8). The complimentary optional criterion on fostering language skills through language classes was also highly valued.

The second most highly valued criterion for the employers was the optional criterion on embedding opportunities for **international internships or work-based learning** for students in the joint programme (optional criterion #4).

The third most highly valued criterion for the employers was that on **fostering digital skills** (optional criterion #7).

Interestingly enough, there were two more groups of criteria that employers rated very highly: first one is on the **quality and transparency of the teaching offer**, and the other – on the **sustainability and environmental impact**. Employers rated as very relevant the criteria on transparency of learning outcomes (mandatory criterion #3) and the criterion on ensuring that a programme has secured QA on a European level (mandatory criterion #4). It was also important for the respondents for a programme to include components and actions related to environmental sustainability and implemented measures to minimise the environmental footprint of its activities (optional criterion #6) and for a programme to be committed to being inclusive and sustainable (mandatory criterion #11).

Employers do not seem to deem as highly relevant criteria on **the jointness of the programme or the degree awarded to the student**. They do not perceive it as an automatic guarantee of high quality, which was clear from their comments. The two lowest scoring criteria are the two



obligatory ones: #1(HEIs involved) and #2 (transnational joint degree delivery). They do, however, value **fostering practical skills like multilingualism and digital proficiency**, and the transparent way in which the quality of the educational offer is assured and confirmed (learning outcomes).

Interestingly enough, employers do think that measures to ensure sustainability and reduce the environmental footprint are also relevant for the future of the labour market and the development of at least some business sectors, and that those values should be fostered and enhanced by the joint study programmes. It is worth noticing that out of 7 most highly valued and deemed as relevant criteria for the employers, 3 come from the optional ones, and two of them are in the top 3: first being fostering multilingualism, which is a mandatory criterion, but then there are criteria on digital skills and internships, both of which are optional.

Overall employers that responded to the survey were satisfied with the criteria presented (62 out of 67 believe that no criteria are missing). Employers wrote, as a reply for the question what criteria might be missing, that they should strengthen **more the relation of study programme with the labour market**, facilitate development of soft skills, and introduce learning activities related to sector-specific regulations and practices. One respondent replied that they would value criterion on enhancing civil education as to benefit from cultural and institutional strengths every EU country has.



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## VERIFICATION OF THE CRITERIA ASSOCIATED TO THE EUROPEAN DEGREE LABEL

One of the key aspects in the development of the Joint European Degree Label has been, since the beginning of the debate, the one concerning **the body that will be appointed for the verification of the compliance with the criteria by international joint programmes pursuing the label.**

A number of scenarios emerged throughout the debate, including those outlined in the 2022 PPMI report “The road towards a possible joint European Degree: identifying opportunities and investigating the impact and feasibility of different approaches”<sup>1</sup> and summarized here below:

- Programme level self-evaluation approach as foreseen in the pilot phase;
- Institutional evaluation: each university evaluates its own joint programmes through the competent bodies and awards the label to those satisfying the criteria;
- Inter-institutional evaluation at the level of the European University alliances performed by an independent cross-alliance body of experts in QA in education (possibly a subgroup of FOR-EU or a specific group created in the framework of the upcoming Communities of Practice);
- National agencies in charge of accreditation/QA for higher education evaluate the compliance of the joint programmes separately and award the label to the national university involved in the consortium;
- National agencies from the EQAR register through the European Approach process, meaning that one national agency entitled to do so will award the label to the whole consortium;
- EU level with a new body created for this specific purpose and an Erasmus+ like approach: the individual joint programmes submit an application in which they explain in which way the programme satisfies all the mandatory criteria. This approach would be the most suitable in case of specific funding allocated to the joint European Degree Label initiative.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Burneikaitė, G., Pocius, D., Potapova, E. et al., The road towards a possible joint European degree – Identifying opportunities and investigating the impact and feasibility of different approaches – Final report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/945147>



As previously mentioned in the document, **programme directors and professionals** involved in the development and management of international joint programmes were consulted on this aspect through specific national focus group sessions.

In general, the most recurrent opinions were roughly equally split **between those advocating for the use of the European Approach for QA in Joint Programmes, and those advocating for a national approach with the national agencies steering the process independently**. A minority of the interviewees expressed their preference for a new central body created ad-hoc for this purpose, while none of the consulted individuals mentioned the programme and institutional levels as suitable for this purpose.

The **European Universities Initiative (EUI) level approach** was introduced only recently and was therefore not included among the available options. Nevertheless, this option was discussed during the ED-AFFICHE mid-term event, and a large number of delegates expressed their appreciation for this possible alternative in case the joint European Degree Label will be directly and explicitly linked to the EUI (which was also seen favourably by many delegates, but with the possibility of including in the joint programmes HEIs external to the alliance). After all, the responsibility for piloting the Joint European Degree Label, determining the criteria, and exploring the potential evolution towards a European Degree qualification has been entrusted to consortia of European Alliances. This inherently establishes the backdrop for deliberations on whether the scope of the European Degree Label or European Degree should be constrained to these alliances. If the European Degree (label) is not limited to the alliances, it does not mean that the cross-institutional approach for alliances is off the table. However, if it remains, then it provides **European Universities with a fast track towards a European Degree** (label), as they would not have to do through programme-based accreditation to get there. Whether or not this is desirable remains primarily a policy question.

It is worth noting that several alliances, including 4EU+, Una Europa, CHARM-EU, EU-CONEXUS, and EC2U, **have already formulated their QA frameworks for their European University**, as evident from the consultation with legal experts and the analysis presented in D3.1. Typically, these frameworks are built upon national or institutional accreditation processes to streamline procedures. Additionally, these alliances are actively developing guidelines for joint programmes, reflecting a pragmatic and sustainable approach in utilizing the networks formed through consortia of European Universities. However, it raises concerns about alignment with the overarching goal of promoting inclusivity and fostering international cooperation on a broader scale.



It should be noted that those advocating for the **verification of the criteria at national level**, also underlined the fact that if this is the case, it is vital to allow a fair and transparent process across the countries to ensure the uniformity and consistency of the results. This should be **pursued by rephrasing the descriptions of the criteria in a more detailed way and at the same time introduce a set of indicators for better readability and measurability**. Moreover, duplications of the accreditation/QA processes should be avoided at all costs. This means that already accredited international joint programmes should be offered the option for a fast-track process for the sole purpose of verifying the fulfilment of the criteria, while the new joint programmes should be offered the possibility to choose between the regular accreditation process and a separate process which also includes elements leading to the joint European Degree Label award.

The respondents advocating for a **more centralised approach at the European level** underlined the fact that **only in this way a real and clear added value would be secured**. In their opinion, if the process of verification and awarding of the label is kept on the national level, there is a risk for the label itself to be seen as just another certificate with no legal value on top of the actual national degree and qualification. Some of the respondents from this group claimed also that this would not add anything to the joint diploma supplement that can already be issued as a complement to the diplomas issued by existing international joint programmes. Nevertheless, a very high number of respondents from this group stated also that this is their preferred option only if all the member states will adhere to the European Approach and ensure that the implementation is feasible. Moreover, the European Approach process should be simplified, and possibly specific funding should be made available for the HEIs to cover the related costs. Representatives from countries in which accreditation is institutional, were particularly inclined in advocating a centralized approach since introducing national accreditation for the sole purpose of obtaining the label would not be attractive for the programme directors and seen more as a burden than as a benefit.

In case the Joint European Degree Label initiative will shift from a label approach towards an actual qualification, the obvious choice would be that the **national agencies would be the bodies entitled to verify the compliance with the criteria**. The question whether this should be attached to the European Approach or dealt with separately in the different countries, would nevertheless remain. The only other alternative would be a modification of the European Treaties to transfer part of the exclusive competence in the field of Education from the member states to the EU. This option has nevertheless been mentioned only by a minority of the consulted programme directors.



Lastly, it is worth noting that certain criteria entail more technical aspects, **demanding expertise in specific fields**. For example, assessing the meaningful use of digital teaching and learning tools, preparing the environment for online education, or evaluating inclusiveness and sustainability all require specialized knowledge. Consequently, it would be advantageous to consider the required skills and expertise that a particular body, organization, or institution should possess to effectively verify whether the criteria have been meaningfully met through the implementation of joint programmes.

## CONCLUSION

These pages have carefully analysed the input regarding the criteria proposed by the EC concerning the European Degree label provided by **joint programme directors/ coordinators from ED-AFFICHE partner and associated partner universities, national and regional authorities, QA and accreditation agencies, employers, and students from all cycles** through their answers to surveys designed for each target group and consultations. Participants in the ED-AFFICHE mid-term event and some other pilot projects also provided valuable insights on the topic.

The added value of both the mandatory and optional criteria according to each of the target groups was studied by comparing their answers. As the detailed comments in the previous pages have shown, in general, the conclusion is that the mandatory criteria should remain as such, while it is suggested to:

- merge optional criterion 1 with mandatory number 7
- merge optional criterion 2 with mandatory number 8
- add optional criteria 3 and 4 to the mandatory list
- move to the list of mandatory ones the optional criterion concerning the development of high-level digital skills by students

Mandatory criterion 5, concerning “Joint Policies for Joint Programmes”, has proven to be the most controversial. Despite the considerable challenges posed by the existing myriad of national legislations, setting up joint policies for joint programmes is key. A **guiding document developed by the EC** indicating member states how to manage joint programmes while offering universities **insights on how to regulate policies** within consortium agreements could ease the alignment of practices across diverse legal frameworks.

Since this is our conclusion, it is also necessary to mention that mandatory criterion 9 ruffled some feathers during the mid-term event. The general feeling was that politics should not

condition how teaching is delivered. The suggestion is either to introduce some indicators to clarify what is expected from an “innovative learning” or promote European values such as green, inclusive, respect for diversity, etc. rather than innovativeness.

Overall, it seems that linking the European Degree (label) to the existing processes of accreditation and QA will cause the least amount of administration, while at the same time (potentially) have the biggest impact on the full implementation of the Bologna tools. The fact that the criteria for the European Degree (label) show similarities with (for example) the ESG’s and the criteria for the European Approach strengthens this conclusion. That being said, none of the current processes seem adequate to deal with the awarding of the European Degree Label to all programmes which request it:

- For new programmes, the European Approach can be used (which does mean an additional hurdle for universities which currently do not need programme-based approach).
- For European University alliances, a (future) interinstitutional QA can replace programme-based accreditation (and thus omit the need to go through the European Approach) for new programmes
- For existing programmes, re-accreditation or QA cycles could be used to award the European Degree Label.

However, for existing programmes without such a re-accreditation or QA cycle in sight and which, nonetheless, would like to obtain the European Degree Label, a new procedure needs to be designed. Following the above-presented logic, it would be one of the (EQAR registered) national accreditation agencies the one which should award the European Degree Label, in a sort of “Light European Approach” procedure. One single agency should be able to check the criteria to award the European Degree Label to a programme, which will then be accepted in all involved countries without the need for their own QA agencies to verify the awarding of the label themselves.

That brings us to the last remark: who will request the QA agencies to design such a new procedure and apply it? And if current QA procedures, (re-)accreditation procedures and the European Approach are used to award the label, then, who decides that the existing procedure can be modified in such a way to add-on this additional task?

From the mid-term event, it became clear that EQAR, however cooperative, does not see itself as the natural coordinator for such design and assignment: their role is more to provide a quality check of the designed procedures afterwards. So, who will coordinate the procedures for the





time being? And who has the competence to give this additional task to the (EQAR registered) QA agencies? The ED-AFFICHE team currently does not have an answer to these questions. However, it became clear during the mid-term event that many of the national QA agencies are more than willing to be involved in the European Degree label and willing to collaborate on these matters.



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## Annexes

[Annex 4 – ED-AFFICHE’s Color coded grid on the overview of stakeholders on the criteria associated to the European degree label](#)



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