Background document on the synergies and potential challenges between the European Degree (label) and the EHEA tools

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have always evolved and adapted the knowledge they provide to the needs of society, to equip students with a valuable, useful and career-ready education. As HEIs have recognized the added value in cooperating with other institutions to discover novel or different ways of teaching and learning they have initiated collaborations, improved their curricula, adapted their provision and in that way increased the value of their degrees and student experiences.

It is important that the HEIs have the autonomy to form the nature of their cooperation, to initiate or terminate them as best fits their needs, and thus safeguard the Fundamental Values of their institution and education system. In that way the collaboration provides maximum benefit to all collaborating partners.

International collaboration, recognition of international education, and the protection, development and promotion of our Fundamental Values form a valuable part of the foundation of the Bologna Process, as adopted by the ministers responsible for higher education in all its member countries.

Meanwhile, European university alliances have taken the initiative towards a new pilot model for European cooperation in higher education. On the basis of this initiative, the Commission has started preparatory work and published its Communication[1] on 27 March 2024 on the Blueprint for a European Degree.

The Communication underlines that the blueprint seeks to establish a new and universally recognized qualification, a key element of the European Education Area. As a concept, the European Degree symbolizes a vision that unifies educational standards across Europe, promotes mobility and aims to create a European space for learning and opportunities.

The European Degree (and the related concept of the European label) builds on the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), further integrating higher education systems of EEA Member States with the intention to make them more compatible and comparable. It aims to enhance the attractiveness of European higher education on a global scale, thereby fostering a stronger EHEA. The adoption of a higher education system based on a common degree structure is one of the key commitments agreed within the Bologna Process.

The great diversity of higher education systems in the EHEA constitutes an exceptionally rich cultural asset which also needs to be preserved, enabling students to fully benefit from its rich cultural, historical and religious heritage while also facilitating access to seamless degree mobility.

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[1] https://op.europa.eu/en/web/eu-law-and-publications/publication-detail/-/publication/4559af49-43e2-11ef-865a-01aa75ed71a1

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This wish for a seamless degree mobility is grounded in several key documents and agreements that have shaped the European cooperation and integration in higher education:

- **Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997)[2]**: This convention, formally known as the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, establishes the legal framework for the recognition of qualifications across Europe, promoting academic mobility and mutual recognition of degrees.

- **Rome Communiqué (2020)[3]**: This communiqué reaffirmed the commitment of EHEA ministers to further enhance the Bologna Process, emphasizing the importance of inclusive and innovative education systems.

- **Tirana Communiqué (2024)[4]**: The most recent communiqué, which outlines current priorities and actions for the EHEA, including the development of transparency, autonomy, and equity in higher education to foster greater mobility and cooperation among higher education institutions.

The European degree (label) aims to improve employability and lifelong learning. How do we best ensure that it can adapt to a changing Europe in the future? Are we properly preparing our students for the realities of the modern world of work? In this era of rapid technological change, when skills can become outdated almost overnight, how can we ensure that the European qualifications remain relevant and valuable?

There is an ongoing dialogue whether and if so, how to establish a new European Degree or European Degree Label, and how it will relate to developments in the much larger European Higher Education Area. In this sense, it is vital to think critically, to challenge assumptions, and to explore new ideas. This plenary session on the European Degree (label) and the European Higher Education Area should serve as a platform for constructive dialogue between all EHEA countries, for sharing best practices, forging stronger partnerships, and debating the potential and possible challenges posed by the European Degree in the context of the EHEA.

There are a few questions to discuss:

- What added value can the potential European degree (label) bring to support the development and implementation of the EHEA Tools?
- Are there difficulties for non-EU members of the EHEA in adopting a potential European degree (label)? What is the relationship between linguistic diversity among EHEA countries and the linguistic criteria set by the EU higher education package?
- How would a potential European degree (label) interrelate with the quality assurance processes as described in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the

2 https://rm.coe.int/168007f2c7
3 https://ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf
4 https://ehea.info/Immagini/Tirana-Communique.pdf

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European Higher Education Area (ESG)[5] and the evaluation of joint programmes through the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes[6]? Are there any implications for these tools and the work of the quality assurance agencies as a result of a potential European degree (label)?

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[5] https://www.enqa.eu/esg-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-the-european-higher-education-area/

[6] https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf