

# MINUTES OF MEETING: IGLO Higher education working group – Higher education package: A Blueprint for European Degree and proposal for Council Recommendation on quality assurance and recognition system

Date:	9 April 2024
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On 9 April the CZELO office participated in the meeting of the IGLO Higher Education working group. At this meeting, representatives of the European Commission presented the recently published “Higher Education (HE) package”, with special focus on the [Communication on a Blueprint for a European Degree](#) and the [proposal for a Council Recommendation on Quality Assurance and Recognition system](#). Briefly they touched also upon the [proposal for a Council Recommendation on Attractive and Sustainable careers in higher education](#).

The Higher education package was published on 27 March and its main objectives are to support skills relevance, visibility of the higher education sector, increased employability, transnational cooperation as a driver for strategic development of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the global competitiveness.

## The Communication on a Blueprint for a European Degree

- = introducing possible concept to be use by countries to facilitate the development of joint programmes and degrees, but the degrees are still to be awarded at national level
- clarification of common misconceptions:
  - no EU coordinating body to start quality assurance and/or accreditation is planned
  - the degree will not be mandatory - each country (and each HEI) can decide if they want to implement it
  - the degree will not be a condition to access any EU funding
  - the package is build on the Bologna process and tools, therefore it is fully in line with the Bologna process and can be potentially used also as a push forward for the Bologna process and adoption its tools
- previous experience from Erasmus Mundus projects and European University Alliances were taken into account in the preparation of the package
  - all alliances share very similar feedback: implementing joint degrees is very difficult, some countries are more flexible than others, but it is enough for one partner not to have such a flexibility and the whole process becomes very complicated and difficult
- therefore the EC’s aim is to put forward a concept and minimum common EU criteria, which can be adopted by member states and HEIs to facilitate the whole process
- European degree can offer and support interdisciplinarity; transnational programmes, organisation and management; student-centred learning; increased labour market relevance; European values and multilingualism; focus on digital and green skills
- the package is based also on the 6 pilot projects on the topic of European Degree involving 140 HEIs, 17 ministries and 20 quality assurance agencies – these projects tested the proposed criteria against more than 1000 joint programmes, which are (or were) already running



- these projects gave feedback on the proposed criteria of the EC, which were then consolidated and are now proposed in the package:
  - 3 clusters of criteria:
    - how good/excellent is the cooperation (quality assurance, awarding ECTS, agreement on selections of students, on exams, on content etc.)
    - learning experience of students and differences in comparison with other programmes (mobility opportunities, relevant content, student-centred approach, etc.)
    - EU values (commitment to respect academic freedom, ensure openness to multilingualism, etc.)
  - all criteria are available as an annex to the published Communication
- What would be the added value of the European Degree?
  - for students (more opportunities to participate in joint programmes, higher employability, sense of European belonging, recognition of transnational education in the sense that employers will know students have international experience, are probably skilled in languages, flexible, adaptable, etc.),
  - for employers (certified highly skilled graduates, attracting talent to Europe, globally minded and multilingual work force, increased possibility to work with universities, etc.),
  - for HEIs (pool resources, cut red tape, wider offer to both students and staff, etc.),
  - for EU and member states (increasing global competitiveness, attracting talent, fostering European spirit of cooperation, etc.)
- the Communication also suggest pathways to move forward from the concept to implementation:
  1. members states will now discuss the proposal and give their position – after approval in the Council of the EU, the European Commission will be able to go ahead on further steps
  2. after the approval the Commission will develop implementation guidelines for the accreditation agencies (through the proposed Policy lab) in cooperation with the organizations involved in the 6 pilot projects
  3. then there will be two options for implementation in individual member states: **full implementation through national law** (programmes will be accredited as a European degree); or quality assurance agencies might be able to award an **European Degree label** to already accredited programmes following a compliance check with the criteria
- the Commission is also proposing a new **European annual degree forum** to regularly take stock of progress, to share practices, to monitor progress and to provide guidance.
- further support of the implementation is foreseen within the Erasmus+ programme: there is a possibility of opening a call for a **European Degree Pathway projects** (for ministries, accreditation agencies etc.) and for a **European Degree Design Measures projects** (for HEIs) on a similar basis as are the current Erasmus Mundus Design Measures projects

## The proposal for Council Recommendation on European quality assurance and recognition system

- it is a crucial topic for achieving the *European Strategy for Universities* and the *European Education Area*
- why is it needed? – to promote trust between HEIs, to facilitate transnational cooperation and mobility, to support move towards institutional quality assurance and to strengthen links between quality assurance (QA) and automatic recognition



- QA and recognition are one of the most common barriers to joint degrees and to mobilities (e.g. bachelor's degree from one country is still not fully recognized to apply for master's degree in all other countries)
- issues at stake to be addressed by the proposal:
  - it takes a long-time to get accreditation (processes are too long and bureaucratic),
  - there is slower response to skills needs (and less flexibility),
  - Bologna tools are not yet fully implemented everywhere,
  - recognition is not yet automatic (despite the Council Recommendation on this topic from 2018)
- 4 main pillars of the proposal for Council Recommendation:
  - transversal recommendations for all QA systems (encouraging continuous improvement, reducing the workload without impact on quality, improving transparency, support for mutual learning activities, ensuring that QA covers the whole educational provision including micro-credentials)
  - system-specific recommendations for more agile transnational cooperation (support possibility of developing cross-institutional QA for alliances of HEIs, supporting robust internal QA, moving toward institutional approach, evidence-based approach, supporting peer-learning),
  - laying the foundation towards a European degree (adopting EU criteria, work with EQAR to identify way to complement the regular ESG review of the work of national quality assurance agencies, allow EQAR agencies to award the European label),
  - implementing automatic recognition (to increase and support automatic recognition, to develop clear guidelines on how to distinguish between automatic recognition and HEIs right to make decisions on admission, to support learning outcomes approach, data collection, evidence-base approaches and cooperation with ENIC-NARIC and ENQA, to support capacity building of staff and digital formats of issuing all degrees)
- negotiations and discussion with member states is expected during the next presidency of the Council of the EU (second half of 2024)

The proposal for a Council Recommendation on Attractive and sustainable careers *(brief introduction only as this was not the main point of the meeting)*

- objectives:
  - there is a need for highly skilled staff to support good transnational cooperation
  - to offer better working condition to staff at HEIs regardless of transnational cooperation – there is a need to better promote, recognize and value diverse academic roles and tasks, such as innovative teaching (also in comparison with recognition of research careers and creating more balanced system between the two)
  - to support for non-traditional academic career paths (e.g. after career breaks due to maternity or any other reason),
  - to address long hours, temporary contracts and other unsatisfactory working conditions
- 3 main pillars of the proposal for Council Recommendation: transnational cooperation, teaching and learning, equality and diversity and well-being

