![enqa. European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education]

ENQA briefing note on the Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education

May 2025

Overview

This briefing note is published by ENQA[1] in response to the Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education, which was approved by the Council of the European Union on 12 May 2025.

The approval of the Recommendation provides confirmation of an agreed policy direction being pursued through the European Education Area (EEA). The proposal for this Recommendation was first published in March 2024 by the European Commission as part of a package to facilitate international cooperation in higher education. ENQA's briefing note on the original proposal is available here. However, the process of negotiation has led to some changes from the original text.

ENQA appreciates that the final text of the Recommendation continues to recognise the importance of quality assurance as a key factor in facilitating internationalisation and welcomes the emphasis on implementing existing tools of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), supporting enhancement-led quality assurance, and removing bureaucracy and legislative barriers to both cross-border quality assurance and automatic recognition.

As the main driver of innovation and practice-sharing for quality assurance agencies in Europe, ENQA is committed to offering support to its members and the European Commission to facilitate implementation. In parallel, ENQA calls on national authorities to ensure that that legislative frameworks fully support cross-border institutional cooperation, including on quality assurance. ENQA repeats its assertion that innovation and deeper international cooperation is only possible if the existing tools and commitments of the Bologna Process are fully implemented, and that caution should be maintained to ensure that the investment in new approaches is proportionate to demand and added value.

Key elements of the Council Recommendation

The Council Recommendation consists of a main text and two annexes. The main text provides recommendations in several areas for quality assurance and recognition. These include:

- **Improving all quality assurance systems**, by strengthening the enhancement dimension and ensuring responsiveness to societal and economic developments, and by fully implementing the existing tools and commitments of the Bologna Process, including those related to quality assurance and the fundamental values.
- **Exploring the development of a dedicated framework for quality assurance for alliances of higher education institutions**, based on the building blocks set out in Annex I. This includes evaluating the need for and added value of such a framework, and, if deemed appropriate, allowing EU quality assurance agencies registered in EQAR and which fully implement the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes to carry out such an external evaluation. The evaluated activities and elements of an institutional internal

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[1] ENQA (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) is the representative body of quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

quality assurance system would then be exempt from any further national level quality assurance requirements. The Recommendation text offers a more gradual approach allowing for testing of the need for a separate quality assurance framework for alliances.

- **Making programme or combined approaches to external quality assurance more agile** to facilitate transnational cooperation. This encourages a shift to institutional-level external quality assurance once higher education institutions have robust internal quality assurance processes in place. At the same time, it further promotes the full application of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes where programme accreditation is still needed and calls for no financial disadvantage to arise from its use in comparison to procedures carried out at national level.

- **Building the foundations towards the joint European degree label** in order to award it to programmes that meet the criteria set out in Annex II. Member States are recommended to allow EU quality assurance agencies that are registered in EQAR and fully implement the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes to either award the label to eligible programmes or to grant self-awarding status to eligible higher education institutions; to explore ways to complement the external reviews of agencies to ensure eligibility to award the label; and to create a repository of programmes that meet the European criteria. The Recommendation also specifies that the use of the criteria is not mandatory nor legally binding for joint programmes, but that the joint European degree label is only awarded when all these criteria are met. The Recommendation and the accompanying resolution (see below) set out a gradual approach with focus on exploring the concept of a label in the first instance and a longer-term ambition of a joint European degree to be considered in 2029.

- **Implementing automatic recognition of qualifications**, including by strengthening the links between quality assurance and recognition, through cooperation between quality assurance agencies and ENIC-NARICs and between ENQA and the ENIC-NARIC Networks.

Annex 1 sets out the building blocks for exploring the development of a dedicated framework for quality assurance for alliances of higher education institutions. This aims towards a new external quality assurance approach for evaluating the effectiveness of alliances' internal quality assurance mechanisms. The evaluation for each alliance would be conducted by an EU quality assurance agency registered in EQAR and fully implementing the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, chosen by the alliance. The framework aims to avoid duplication of procedures, for the results to be recognised across the EHEA and for there to be exemptions from national level quality assurance procedures for education provision covered by the evaluation. It would be based on the ESG and incorporate the standards of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and the European Degree Label criteria. Members States commit to working with stakeholders to explore how such a framework can be developed and implemented, building on the previously developed EUniQ framework[2] and taking into account the results of the IMINQA project.[3]

Annex II sets out the European criteria for a joint European degree label. These are based on those developed and piloted in previous years for the joint European degree. The criteria are now grouped into two sections: the first covers programme organisation and the second covers the European dimension and includes value-driven criteria.

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[2] The EUniQ project developed and tested a framework for the external quality assurance of alliances in 2019-2021.

[3] The project published a report in April 2025: *Quality Assurance of the European Universities alliances: state of play and future perspectives*.

Council Resolution on a joint European degree label and the next steps towards a possible joint European degree

Alongside the Council Recommendation, the Council also adopted a complementary Resolution that outlines the Member States' vision for a joint European degree label and proposes a roadmap towards a possible joint European degree, with three phases to be carried out by 2029.

2025-26 – Phase 1: Finalising the preparations for the rollout of the joint European degree label

The European Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, plans to establish a Policy Lab within the framework of the Working Group on Higher Education under the EEA strategic framework. The Policy Lab will be tasked with developing clear definitions, descriptions, indicators, and a common methodology for verifying compliance with the joint European degree label criteria. It will also be responsible for creating guidelines and procedures for issuing the joint European degree label, as well as designing a standardised template for its visual identity.

Member States are invited to fully implement the Bologna instruments, where this has not yet been achieved, and to take the necessary steps to enable the rollout of the joint European degree label by the end of 2026.

2026-27 – Phase 2: Rollout of the joint European degree label, monitoring its implementation, evaluating its use and conducting feasibility and exploratory works on a joint European degree

During this phase, the joint European degree label is expected to be rolled out between 2026 and 2028 to test its feasibility and assess its potential political, legal, financial, and administrative implications. The Policy Lab will monitor and evaluate progress, while also facilitating structured engagement with stakeholders. It will assess the outcomes and added value of the joint European degree label, identify challenges encountered, and examine the broader impact of the initiative. An evaluation report on the implementation of the joint European degree label, along with a feasibility study on the possible introduction of a joint European degree, will be submitted to the Council for further decision by the end of 2028.

2029 – Phase 3: Reflecting and making an evidence-informed decision on next steps towards a joint European degree

Based on the evaluation report, the Council may decide on the long-term adoption of the label and invite the Commission to propose concrete next steps towards the establishment of a joint European degree.

Reflections from ENQA

ENQA appreciates the clarity of the policy direction provided by the approval of the Recommendation, as well as the step-by-step approach for implementation outlined in the Resolution.

Furthermore, ENQA welcomes that the Recommendation:

- Emphasises the importance of the existing Bologna Process tools and the need to implement these fully as a pre-condition for the success of the EU initiatives. This is in the interest of all students in the EHEA, not just those who wish to enrol on joint programmes.
- Encourages robust internal quality assurance systems both within individual institutions and jointly across European University alliances, fostering institutional quality culture. This aligns

with the EHEA principle that HEIs have the primary responsibility for the quality and quality assurance of their education provision.

- Recognises the importance of stakeholder cooperation across the sector to find solutions for implementing all elements of the Recommendation.

ENQA acknowledges the ongoing constructive dialogue with the European Commission and its plans to ensure support for agencies in this work. This will be vital in order to address several practical challenges, some of which were also highlighted in ENQA's initial response to the proposals. These include:

- The increased workload for quality assurance agencies, limited financial and human resources beyond the scope of project funding, and the need for peer-learning and exchange opportunities.
- The limited remit of quality assurance agencies to assess label criteria that fall outside their usual scope; for example, those related to values and democratic citizenship.
- The difficulty of defining the object and scope of an alliance-level evaluation and therefore also the extent of potential exemptions from national level requirements.
- The requirement for significant national level concessions and legal changes for such exemptions, which have already proved difficult to achieve for EHEA commitments such as the use of the European Approach.
- The impact of an overall shift from programme accreditation to institutional level quality assurance in those countries that see this as an essential element of their own arrangements and/or where programme accreditation is essential for programmes where fitness to practice matters for a profession.
- A possible contradictory pressure to move to institutional level quality assurance but with an expectation of transparent public information about joint degree programmes.

The steps outlined in the Recommendation and the Resolution could have significant impact on the work of quality assurance agencies. For them to effectively play their part, ENQA calls for:

- National authorities to ensure that legislative frameworks allow them to comply with the ESG and use the European Approach (where applicable).
- Agencies to be given the resources and time to develop the relevant expertise and to integrate new responsibilities into their work.
- Agencies to be given the remit to effectively implement the new activities in a way that makes use of synergies with existing approaches to minimise the bureaucratic and resource burden.

ENQA also encourages the monitoring and evaluation of the demand for and added value of the joint European Degree label and alliance-level external quality assurance in order to ensure that the development of new approaches is proportionate to the volume of this type of education provision across the sector as a whole, particularly as the eventual ambitions regarding the number of students on joint European degree programmes is unclear.

ENQA commits to fully engage in the work to address the challenges and needs outlined above, and will explore with the European Commission how it could support the development of the quality assurance eco-systems needed for the joint European degree label and external quality assurance of alliances.