

TOWARDS A JOINT EUROPEAN DEGREE: PERSPECTIVES FROM ACROSS THE ECIU ALLIANCE

A study by Lodz University of Technology



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Key definitions

The definitions below are concise adaptations of key sources informing the debate on the Joint European Degree. These include the Council Recommendation of 12 May 2025 (CR), the Operational Guide for the Joint European Degree Label (OG), the Blueprint for a European Degree (BP) and selected ECIU publications. Full bibliographic details are provided in the Bibliography.

Challenge-Based Learning: A learning approach in which students work, often in interdisciplinary teams and together with external stakeholders, on real-life societal challenges and co-create possible solutions. (Source: ECIU University White Paper on Micro-credentials)

Double/multiple degrees: Separate degrees awarded by two or more HEIs for completion of a joint programme. Two separate awards constitute a double degree; more than two constitute multiple degrees. Such programmes are not eligible for the Joint European Degree Label. (Source: OG)

Flexible Learning Pathways: Learning arrangements that give learners greater choice and flexibility in shaping their educational journeys, including in relation to the content, timing, place and combination of learning activities. (Source: ECIU University position paper)

Joint degree (diploma): A single degree document awarded by the HEIs offering a joint programme and recognised as its qualification under relevant national frameworks. (Source: OG)

Joint degree programme: A joint programme leading to a joint degree. (Source: CR; OG)

Joint educational activities: An umbrella term used in this report for educational activities jointly delivered by two or more HEIs, including joint and double degree programmes as well as shorter formats such as short-term mobility linked to ECIU modules and other non-degree activities. (Definition created for the purpose of this report)

Joint European Degree: A developing concept for a joint degree awarded on completion of a joint programme delivered by HEIs in different countries, including at least two EU Member States. It would meet common European criteria and be quality assured under the ESG and the European Approach, with the aim of facilitating automatic recognition in the EU. Its final form is not yet settled. (Source: CR; BP)

Joint European Degree Label: A quality label for joint programmes delivered through transnational cooperation by HEIs in different countries, including at least two EU Member States. It is based on common European criteria and awarded following assessment by a quality assurance body. (Source: OG; CR)

Joint programme: An integrated curriculum jointly coordinated and offered by HEIs in different countries, leading either to a joint degree or to separate double/multiple degrees. (Source: OG)

Micro-credentials: Evidence of learning outcomes achieved through a short learning experience and assessed against transparent standards. In the ECIU model, micro-credentials may also recognise skills and competences and contribute to flexible, stackable learning pathways. (Source: ECIU White Paper on Micro-credentials)



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List of Abbreviations

DCU	Dublin City University Ireland
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
ECIU	European Consortium of Innovative Universities
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EMJM	Erasmus Mundus Joint Master
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
EU	European Union
EUI	European Universities Initiative
FLPs	Flexible Learning Pathways
HEI	Higher Education Institution
INSA	Institut National des Sciences Appliquées, France
JED	Joint European Degree
JEDL	Joint European Degree Label
KTU	Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania
LiU	Linköping University, Sweden
NAWA	Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange
TAU	Tampere University, Finland
TUHH	Hamburg University of Technology, Germany
TUL	Lodz University of Technology, Poland
UA	University of Aveiro, Portugal
UAB	Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain
UiS	University of Stavanger, Norway
UniTrento	University of Trento, Italy
UT	University of Twente, Netherlands

Introduction

European higher education is moving towards deeper cross-border cooperation and more integrated forms of educational provision, reinforced by EU policy developments aimed at supporting closer and more sustained institutional cooperation.

The European Universities Initiative has been a key part of this development, supporting long-term alliances between universities, while the European Commission's "Blueprint for a European Degree" and the subsequent development of the **Joint European Degree Label** have placed joint degree provision more firmly on the European policy agenda. Work on a possible **Joint European Degree** remains ongoing, while the Label has moved into implementation, recognising eligible joint degree programmes that meet common European criteria.

ECIU University provides a particularly relevant setting in which to examine these developments. Established in 2019 within the European Universities Initiative, ECIU University brings together 12 European members of the **European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU)**, a network founded in 1997 around a shared commitment to innovation and cooperation. Building on this foundation, ECIU University has developed an educational model centred on flexible and innovative forms of international learning and collaboration.

The emerging Joint European Degree framework therefore presents new possibilities for educational cooperation within ECIU University.

While the emerging Joint European Degree debate formed an important point of departure for this study, the research takes a broader view of educational cooperation across ECIU University, considering members' existing experience with joint and double degree provision with different partner institutions, alongside more flexible approaches to learning and collaboration. In doing so, the study draws on joint and double degree programmes developed by individual member universities rather than on a portfolio developed under the ECIU University framework.



AIMS

1. Study rationale and aims

The study was developed in response to the growing importance of joint educational provision within European higher education. A central point of reference was the European Commission's 2024 Higher Education Package and the emerging Joint European Degree and Joint European Degree Label initiatives, which placed renewed emphasis on closer cooperation between European universities in the development of joint degree programmes. This agenda also connects joint education with wider European objectives, including **mobility, multilingualism, inclusion, democratic values, and a stronger sense of European identity and belonging.**¹

The research was undertaken by TUL within the Support for European Universities Alliances programme, administered by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA). The programme aims to strengthen the role of Polish higher education institutions within European Universities alliances by supporting deeper international cooperation, the exchange of good practices and the development of innovative approaches to education.² This publication contributes to these objectives by **bringing together institutional perspectives from across the ECIU Alliance on the emerging Joint European Degree agenda and on members' wider experience with joint education.**

The scope of the study extended beyond the Joint European Degree – it aimed to map existing approaches to **joint and double degree programmes**, examine differences in institutional strategies and levels of experience, and identify the main benefits, challenges and good practices associated with their development and implementation. Attention was also given to **flexible learning pathways, micro-credentials and other innovative forms of educational cooperation.**

| **Key study aims** What the research specifically set out to explore

- 1
Examine how ECIU member universities currently approach joint and collaborative education;
- 2
Identify institutional, legal, administrative, financial and practical barriers to developing joint provision;
- 3
Explore perceived benefits and incentives associated with joint and double degree programmes;
- 4
Explore levels of awareness and perceptions of the Joint European Degree and Joint European Degree Label;
- 5
Consider the extent to which existing joint programmes align with the Joint European Degree Label criteria;
- 6
Identify innovative practices and possible directions for future educational cooperation across ECIU.

¹ European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2024), [Blueprint for a European degree](#), pp. 5–6.

² Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA), European Universities Support Programme. [Available online](#)

CONTEXT

2. Wider policy context

| A changing landscape for European cooperation

Over the past decade, EU policy has increasingly encouraged universities to move beyond student mobility towards deeper forms of educational cooperation, including joint educational provision, flexible learning opportunities and closer institutional collaboration. The European Universities Initiative has been an important driver of this shift. The first 17 European University alliances were selected in 2019, including ECIU University, and the initiative has since expanded considerably.³

By the second half of 2023, the alliances covered by the European Commission's evaluation had developed around 160 joint degree programmes and more than 430 short courses leading to micro-credentials.⁴

At the same time, closer cooperation has made differences between national higher education systems increasingly visible. Accreditation and quality assurance, recognition, institutional autonomy and administrative requirements can all make it difficult for universities operating under different national frameworks to develop and deliver programmes that genuinely function as one.

| From the Joint European Degree vision to implementation

The Joint European Degree Initiative has developed against this backdrop, representing one of the EU's most ambitious efforts to deepen transnational cooperation in higher education. Its longer-term ambition is to facilitate the creation of a **Joint European Degree** under a shared European framework, leading ultimately to a qualification that could be jointly awarded and automatically recognised across the EU.⁵

In the shorter term, this agenda has resulted in the **Joint European Degree Label**, which recognises joint programmes leading to joint degrees that meet an agreed set of European criteria. The Label does not constitute a new qualification in itself; rather, it is awarded alongside an existing joint degree. Importantly, the Label is now being implemented, while **a decision on introducing the future Joint European Degree itself has yet to be taken.**⁶

³ European Commission, [European Universities Initiative – Timeline and future developments](#)

⁴ European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2025), [Report on the outcomes and transformational potential of the European Universities Initiative](#), pp. 159, 166.

⁵ European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2024), [Blueprint for a European degree](#), pp. 5–6.

⁶ Council of the European Union (2025), [Council Resolution on a joint European degree label and the next steps towards a possible joint European degree](#), p. 2, point 9.

One feature of the Joint European Degree Label framework is particularly important for understanding its relevance to this report: its scope is deliberately defined around genuinely joint degree provision. The Label applies specifically to joint programmes leading to joint degrees; double and multiple degrees alone, micro-credentials and smaller learning units fall outside its scope.

Its sixteen criteria cover both the organisation of a genuinely joint programme and its wider European dimension, including mobility, interdisciplinarity, multilingualism, inclusion, employability and European values.⁷

| ECIU University in the changing landscape

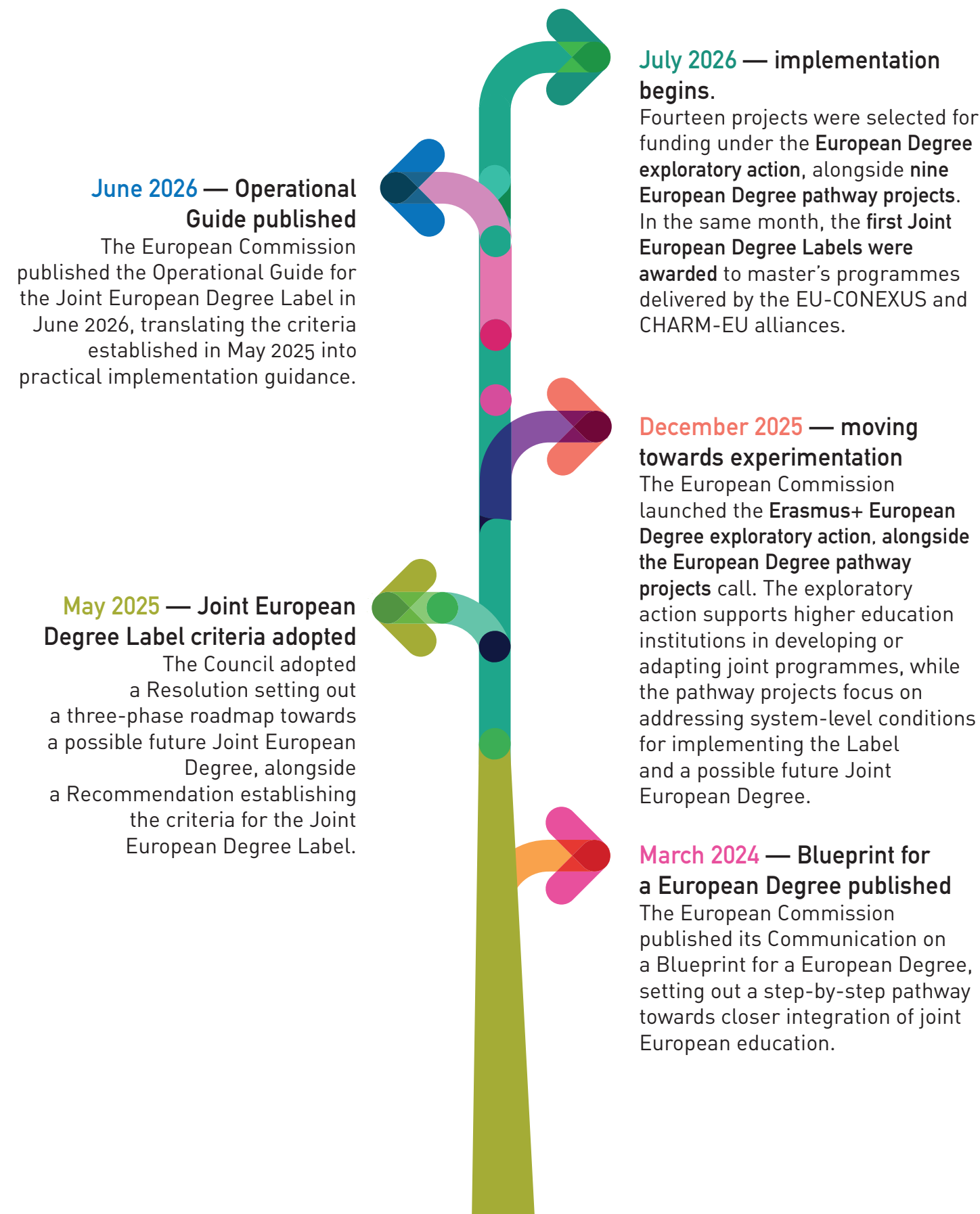
This emerging framework is particularly relevant to ECIU University, whose educational model has historically emphasised Flexible Learning Pathways, ECIU Learning Opportunities, Challenge-Based Learning and micro-credentials rather than joint degree programmes.⁸ These concepts remain central to ECIU's approach, and the Alliance does not currently offer a degree jointly designed and awarded under the ECIU University framework.

However, the European Degree agenda creates new possibilities to complement flexible and modular learning with recognised joint programmes. ECIU's engagement is already visible in the projects funded under the **Erasmus+ European Degree Exploratory Action: ECIU University member institutions will participate in two of the 14 projects selected for funding in July 2026: EDL-STEP and PROCEED**. EDL-STEP involves TUL, KTU and TAU, with TUL acting as project coordinator, while PROCEED involves UAB, LiU and INSA Group, represented by two of its institutes, INSA Lyon and INSA Rouen.⁹

Together, these projects will allow ECIU member universities to move from policy discussion to practical testing of joint programmes aligned with the Joint European Degree Label framework.

The current framework has emerged progressively from EU efforts to facilitate transnational joint degree provision, with the Joint European Degree becoming a more concrete policy objective through the European Strategy for Universities in 2022. The timeline below highlights the key developments that have since moved the initiative from concept towards implementation.

| "The timeline below highlights the key developments that have since moved the initiative from concept towards implementation."



⁷ European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2026), [Operational guide for the Joint European Degree Label](#), pp. 12–27, 33, 36.

⁸ ECIU University (2021), [Flexible learning paths – ECIU University's take on the European Degree](#).

⁹ European Commission (2026), [Results of the Erasmus+ calls for proposals: European Degree exploratory action and European Degree pathway projects](#).

METHODOLOGY

3. Methodology

| Desk research

The study began with desk research covering two complementary areas. First, relevant EU policy documents and ECIU publications were reviewed to establish the policy and strategic context of the research. A concise overview of the main developments identified through this review is presented in the Wider policy context section of the report (Chapter 2).

Second, the research team reviewed publicly available information on the websites of all ECIU member universities to identify existing joint and double degree programmes, as well as the information available on the Joint European Degree and Joint European Degree Label. The review provided an initial indication of the scale and types of joint provision across institutions. However, the availability and level of detail of this information varied considerably between university websites: some institutions had dedicated webpages for joint and double degree programmes, while others presented the information in a more fragmented way or provided very limited to no information. The website review was therefore used primarily as an orientation tool rather than as a definitive audit of institutional programme portfolios.

The desk research informed the development of the interview guide and survey questionnaire and supported the identification of potential participants for both empirical components. It was followed by semi-structured interviews and a survey of staff responsible for joint and double degree provision.

| Qualitative interviews

A total of **34 semi-structured interviews involving 54 staff members from all 12 ECIU member universities** were conducted between December 2025 and June 2026. Participants represented a diverse range of roles and perspectives, including administrative staff involved in the management of joint and double degree programmes, academic coordinators and members of senior university management.

Potential interviewees were identified primarily through the initial desk research, with particular attention given to staff whose roles or experience were relevant to joint and double degree provision as well as senior management staff responsible for international cooperation. Where the appropriate contacts could not be readily identified from publicly available information, ECIU colleagues at the respective institution, including ECIU institutional coordinators and other senior staff members, were asked to suggest relevant participants.

The aim was not to create a statistically representative sample, but to capture a range of informed institutional perspectives and relevant professional experience across all ECIU member universities.

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide, providing a common set of topics and questions while allowing participants to elaborate on issues particularly relevant to their roles and institutional contexts. Most interviews were conducted by two members of the research team. Of the 34 interviews, 17 were individual interviews, while 15 involved two participants, one involved three participants and one involved four participants. With two exceptions, where scheduling during site visits made this impossible, interviews were conducted in person on the campuses of ECIU member universities.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and participated on the basis of informed consent. Participants were asked to sign a consent form, which, whenever possible, was provided in advance of the interview to allow sufficient time for review. The form explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the intended use of the interview material and the arrangements for recording, anonymisation and data handling. Interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed, except in one case where the participant did not consent to recording; detailed notes were taken by a member of the research team instead. The material used for analysis and reporting was anonymised, and individual interviewees are not identified in the report.

| **Joint and double degree survey**

The second component consisted of a **survey targeting coordinators and other staff responsible for joint and double degree programmes at ECIU member universities**. Building on the desk research and participant identification undertaken for the interview component, **invitations were sent to 113 staff members across all 12 ECIU member universities**. These included coordinators of individual programmes as well as staff with institution- or faculty-level responsibility for Erasmus Mundus Joint Master programmes or other joint and double degree provision.

The survey was conducted between May and June 2026 and received **25 responses from 9 ECIU University member universities**. It covered both academic and administrative perspectives and focused on specific programmes coordinated or managed by respondents. The distribution of responses across institutions was uneven, with two universities accounting for almost half of the responses, while three universities were not represented in the final sample. These characteristics of the sample are taken into account when interpreting the survey findings.

The questionnaire comprised three main sections: (1) general information about the joint or double degree programme; (2) alignment with the Joint European Degree Label criteria adopted by the Council in May 2025; and (3) attitudes towards the Joint European Degree Label and further cooperation within ECIU. It was designed to complement the interviews by providing programme-level information on existing joint and double degree provision, examining the extent to which programmes aligned with the Label criteria, and exploring respondents’

perceptions of the potential benefits of the Label and the support that might be required to meet outstanding requirements.

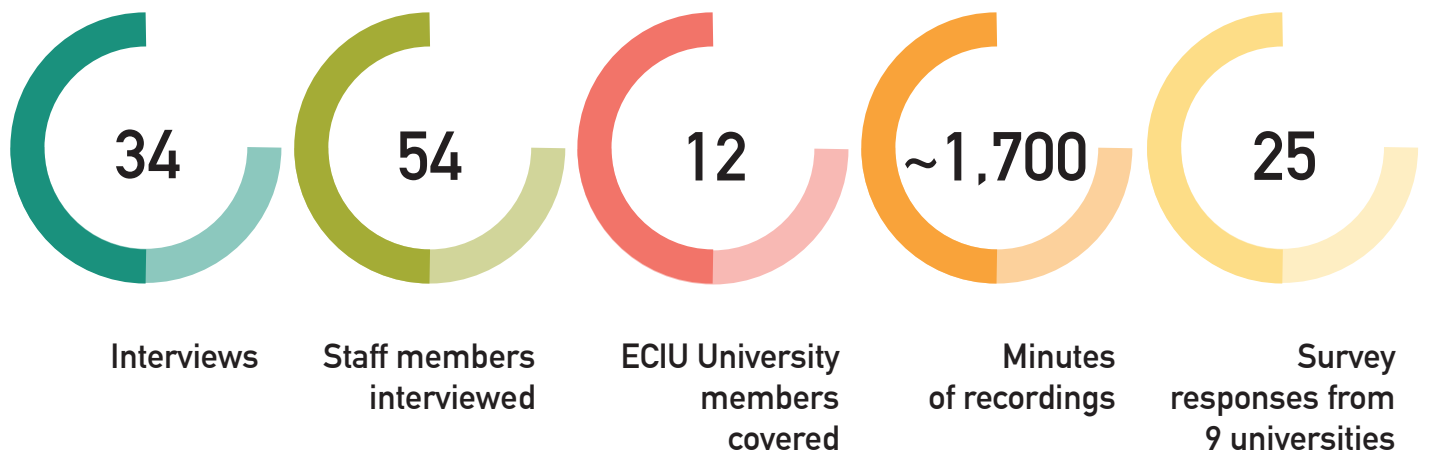
| **Data analysis**

Interview transcripts and notes were **analysed thematically using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software**. The coding framework combined deductive and inductive elements. Most codes were developed in advance from the main topics covered by the interview guide, providing a consistent framework for analysing material across institutions. Additional codes were introduced after data collection to capture themes and issues that emerged from the interviews but were not sufficiently represented in the initial coding framework.

The coded material was then reviewed across interviews and institutions to identify recurring themes, differences in institutional perspectives and experiences, and illustrative examples of particular approaches or practices. Organising the material thematically also enabled the research team to systematically retrieve and compare relevant excerpts across the full interview dataset during preparation of the report.

The two research components therefore provided complementary perspectives. **The interviews offered a broader view of institutional approaches, experiences and attitudes, while the survey added more structured, programme-level insights into existing joint and double degree provision and its relationship to the Joint European Degree Label criteria.**

| **Study at a glance** Key facts about the research behind this report



| Study limitations

As an exploratory study covering 12 ECIU University member universities, **the research provides a broad overview of institutional experiences and perspectives rather than a comprehensive assessment of each institution.** Several limitations should therefore be considered when interpreting the findings.

Although every effort was made to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience, the **number, roles and areas of expertise of interviewees varied between institutions.** Some participants had extensive experience of joint and double degree provision, while others had more limited knowledge of particular topics. Differences in the availability of information on institutional websites also affected the identification of relevant participants and the depth of information collected. The findings therefore reflect the perspectives of those interviewed rather than complete institutional positions.

A related limitation concerns the **availability and consistency of information on joint and double degree programmes.** Publicly available information was not always complete or up to date, and in some cases differed from information provided during interviews, including the reported number or types of programmes offered. As the study did not independently audit institutional programme portfolios, information on existing provision should be treated as indicative rather than definitive.

Participants also differed considerably in their awareness of the Joint European Degree initiative. While some were already familiar with the topic, others had limited or no prior knowledge of it, meaning that related questions could not be explored to the same depth in all interviews.

The timing of the research should also be taken into account. Interviews were conducted between December 2025 and June 2026, while the Joint European Degree framework was still evolving and before detailed implementation guidance for the Label became widely available. Participants' responses therefore reflect the information and institutional discussions available at the time.

The **survey findings should be interpreted with particular caution.** The survey received 25 responses from 9 of the 12 ECIU member universities, with responses unevenly distributed between institutions. The sample is too small and uneven to support statistically representative conclusions about ECIU as a whole; the results instead provide an indicative programme-level perspective that complements the interviews.

Finally, INSA Group requires particular consideration- it comprises seven institutes with distinct educational structures and curricula. The interviews covered only one of these institutes, so the evidence should not be interpreted as representing the Group as a whole.



| Study limitations

Key considerations when interpreting the findings

INTERVIEW

4. Perspectives from across ECIU: interview findings

The findings presented below are based on interviews conducted across ECIU member universities (with publicly available information used selectively to complement the interview evidence). They reflect the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees rather than formal institutional positions and may vary depending on participants' roles and areas of expertise.

Across these individual perspectives, the interviews revealed a number of recurring themes as well as important differences between institutions, which are presented below. Every effort has been made to preserve interviewees' anonymity; however, specific institutions are identified where relevant to illustrate differences in institutional approaches, highlight particular practices or provide examples of successful initiatives.

4.1. Institutional approaches to joint educational activities

Although ECIU provides a common strategic framework for educational cooperation, its member universities differ considerably in how they understand and pursue internationalisation. Internationalisation is generally recognised as important across all ECIU partners, but institutions use different tools to achieve it, depending on their national context, institutional profile, leadership priorities and internal capacity.

Those tools extend well beyond joint and double degree programmes. Student exchanges, lifelong learning, micro-credentials, summer schools, challenge-based learning and other flexible forms of international education all form part of the same picture, and universities differ mainly in how much weight they give to each.

Interviewees' accounts combined with publicly available information indicate that, at some universities, joint and double degree programmes are treated as visible and prestigious elements of the institutional offer. For example, one of the interviewees stated: *"It's a strategic area of great importance to this rectorate team that we have [joint and double degree programmes] in place now at the university"*. For other institutions, joint and double degrees are more peripheral, as another interviewee indicated: *"(...) joint programs are not particularly high on the agenda now in institutional strategy"*.

Between these two positions, the interviews allow only an approximate grouping. In several cases, interviews were conducted with coordinators of individual programmes rather than with central services, which means they do not support conclusions about an institution’s full catalogue of provision. What follows therefore describes how interviewees positioned joint and double degree programmes within their institutions’ priorities, rather than a verified inventory of what each university offers. Broadly, three positions emerge.

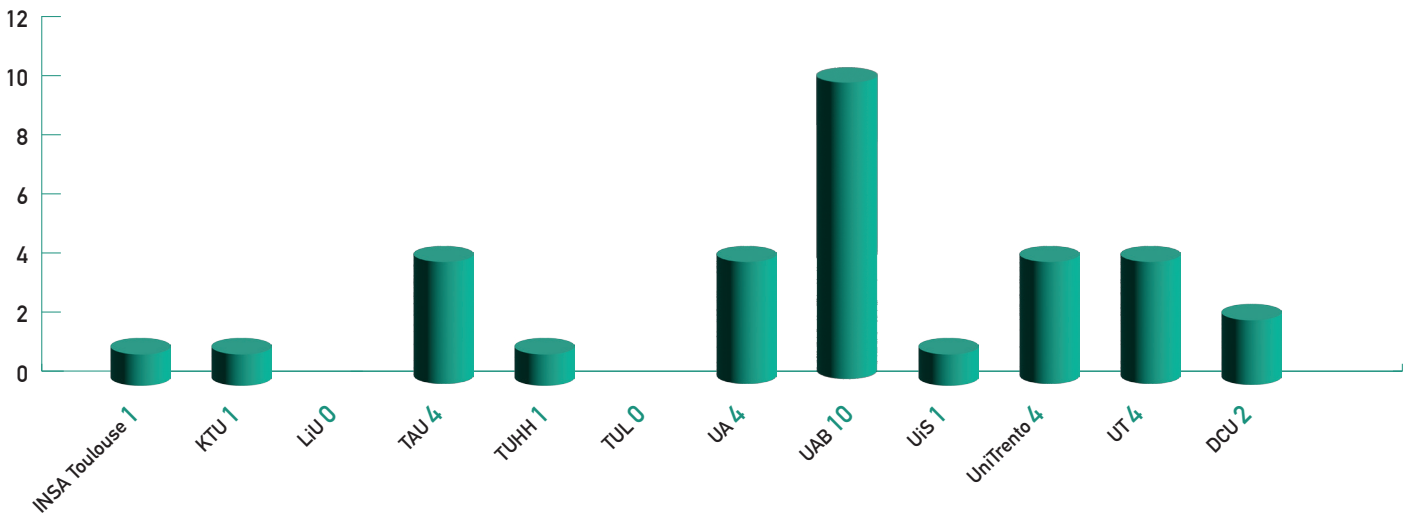
For a first group of universities, degree-level cooperation is an explicit strategic objective. Dublin City University (DCU), for example, regards its Global Business double degree programmes as an important element of its internationalisation strategy, supporting accreditation and institutional reputation. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) has a long history of developing joint programmes and was among the first universities in its regional context to invest substantially in this area. A similar pattern is evident at the University of Trento (UniTrento), which has a long-standing and diversified portfolio of joint educational initiatives, including a high number of joint and double degree agreements.

In a second group, such programmes are present in the offer but remain peripheral. At Hamburg University of Technology (TUHH), joint and double degrees are thought to add prestige and visibility, but are also perceived as workload-intensive initiatives serving a relatively small group of students and therefore not a key institutional focus. The University of Aveiro (UA) shows a related pattern: it runs several Erasmus Mundus programmes, yet interviewees described no institutional strategy for increasing the number of joint degrees, with attention directed instead towards a large micro-credential portfolio built around regional skills needs. Elsewhere such programmes were placed explicitly between the two poles – *“[It is] not a niche, it is not a huge priority. It’s in between. It’s an extra opportunity which we want to offer our students.”*

A third group has limited provision, or provision that has receded. At some universities only a handful of double degree arrangements exist across the entire institution, and interviewees described them as rare and exceptional. At others, degree-level cooperation was previously given greater strategic importance but has since become less prominent.

As an additional point of reference, the chart below shows the number of Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (EMJMs) listed in the EACEA catalogue for ECIU member universities.¹⁰ The figures illustrate considerable variation across the Alliance members, but they should by no means be interpreted as a complete inventory of joint or double degree provision. EMJMs represent only one form of joint degree programme, and **there is no central public database that comprehensively captures all joint and double degree programmes offered by European universities.**

| Number of Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters listed in the EACEA catalogue for ECIU University member universities



Taken together, the interviewees’ accounts suggest that universities interpret ECIU priorities through their own strategies, regulations, organisational structures and educational traditions. Joint educational activities are consequently developed in different forms and at different speeds across the Alliance.

| **ECIU University’s evolving strategic focus**

Interviewees’ accounts also reflected an evolution in ECIU University’s strategic focus. Several participants recalled that the Alliance initially concentrated on Flexible Learning Pathways and micro-credentials rather than conventional joint programme development. One participant captured both the original choice and the subsequent broadening of the agenda:

“From the start, [in] 2019, we decided not to go for standard, traditional collaboration tools and to start these new flexible learning pathways and micro-credentials. And we decided to concentrate on this. And we had no human resources to do both. (...) It was very much around the conversations around the European Degree Label, and quite a few rectors said, ‘Let’s also go in that direction. Let’s not be exclusive.’ And so yes, there is a strategic shift.”

This helps explain why centrally developed joint degree provision has not historically been a core element of ECIU University’s educational model, while also suggesting that joint programmes are being considered as a complementary strand rather than as a replacement for Flexible Learning Pathways and micro-credentials.

¹⁰ European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), [Erasmus Mundus Catalogue](#). Data were compiled by the authors in August 2026 based on programme listings available at the time of access.

| Variety of joint and double degree programmes

The design of joint and double degree provision varies substantially across universities, including in type, geographical reach, academic level, mobility requirements and degree-awarding arrangements.

Provision also differs in scale and disciplinary spread, ranging from concentrated portfolios in individual faculties to broader institutional portfolios spanning several fields and degree levels. Interviewees also pointed to an important distinction between the joint organisation of a programme and the qualification ultimately awarded. A programme may be jointly designed and delivered by several universities without necessarily resulting in a single joint diploma. The regulatory and organisational challenges associated with different degree-awarding arrangements are discussed in more detail in Section 4.3.

Programmes also vary in their mobility design and language requirements. Some require students to spend a full year or even two years abroad, while others involve one semester or a shorter period of physical mobility. The sequence of study may also differ, for example with students completing the first year at their home university and the second year at a partner institution. Some universities are also experimenting with hybrid or “sandwich” models that combine exchange periods with enrolment as a degree-seeking student. English is frequently used in internationally oriented programmes, although some partnerships require proficiency in the language of the partner country. At DCU, for example, the expectation that students would learn the local language historically influenced the choice of partner institutions and limited the range of possible destinations.

Finally, interviewees described substantial variation in the organisation of administrative support. Some universities have dedicated central units or coordinators for joint educational initiatives, while others distribute responsibility across faculties, departments and central services. In some cases, decentralised academic responsibility is combined with central administrative coordination. The main difference therefore lies not simply in whether structures are centralised or decentralised, but in how clearly responsibilities are allocated and how easily programme teams can access relevant expertise.

| Funding and sustainability

Joint and double degree programmes provide access to funding but rarely function as direct revenue sources.

According to the interviewees, their financial value is more often indirect: they can attract externally funded students, increase international enrolment, improve institutional visibility and support accreditation or ranking objectives.

Interviewees identified Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters as the clearest example of programmes linked to substantial external funding. EU grants support both participating institutions and students, including tuition costs and scholarships. This funding makes programmes internationally attractive and enables universities

to recruit talented students from regions where self-funded participation would otherwise be difficult.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that joint and double degree programmes may be better understood as strategic investments than as straightforward funding sources. The financial and sustainability challenges associated with these programmes are examined in more detail in Section 4.3.

| Institutional culture and adaptability

Interviewees’ accounts suggest that cultural and organisational factors influence whether universities perceive a challenge as manageable or as a major barrier.

Institutions with flexible regulations, adaptable procedures and a willingness to find workable solutions within existing frameworks are generally better positioned to develop joint educational initiatives.

The interview material suggests that the same practical difficulty may have different consequences in different settings. At one university, differences in institutional procedures or programme requirements may be addressed through coordination and compromise. Elsewhere, strict interpretations of internal or national rules may prevent the programme from progressing. Trust, communication and strong personal relationships can help partners resolve such problems. One respondent told us: *“I think it's important to understand that it's a question of trust (...) if they say they do it and it's my partner university, I believe they do it. That's fine.”*

Interviewees’ accounts also suggest differences in institutional openness to experimentation. While some universities are willing to adapt procedures and test new arrangements, others take a more cautious approach to changes in established practice.

| Bottom-up versus top-down

As mentioned earlier in this section, universities differ in how they organise administrative support: some have dedicated central units or coordinators for joint educational initiatives, while others distribute responsibility across faculties, departments and central services.

At UAB and UniTrento, long-standing engagement in joint provision is supported by dedicated staff at institutional level, including specific responsibility for Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters programmes. TAU, meanwhile, has reportedly included the expansion of joint and double degree programmes in its recent internationalisation strategy. Linköping University (LiU) has a formal “roadmap to Europe” that identifies European degrees and micro-credentials as areas for future development, although its current portfolio of joint and double degree programmes remains limited.

At the same time, interviewees described how many **individual programmes remain bottom-up**. They are initiated by academics who already have research

links or personal relationships with colleagues at partner universities. At the University of Stavanger (UiS), for example, joint programmes had previously been supported through institutional targets, including at faculty level, but these targets were later dropped, leaving the area with a less prominent central strategic position. One respondent explained: *“(…) most of the time I would say it’s like that [bottom up] because it requires cooperation, ongoing cooperation already between the institutions and that usually comes from teachers and researchers.”* At INSA Toulouse, in turn, interviewees described the development of double degrees as a mixture of externally driven opportunities and bottom-up initiatives emerging from existing academic and research relationships.

Taken together, the interviewees’ accounts suggest that the contrast is not simply between bottom-up and top-down approaches. In many cases, institutional strategy creates a supportive environment, but concrete initiatives still develop opportunistically and depend on individual champions.

| Pro-European approach

A stronger European orientation supports engagement but does not remove practical constraints.

Interviewees described European cooperation as attractive for different reasons, including institutional strategy, emerging EU initiatives and, in some cases, a broader sense of European identity. At LiU, for example, interviewees linked future development directly to the emerging European Degree agenda, while at UniTrento European initiatives were seen as helping to accelerate institutional and regulatory change. In the Irish context, interviewees linked European engagement to a strong sense of belonging to Europe and, in part, to a desire to distinguish Ireland from its historical relationship with the United Kingdom:

“We (…) are very proud of being European. (…) I think people that work in universities understand it’s going to be a lot of work, but I think they would be proud to have the European label. (…) they want to be more European as a nation.”

Some interviewees suggested that a shared European identity may also make some destinations more attractive to students. European countries may be perceived as culturally familiar, accessible and connected through shared values. Nevertheless, European identity does not remove practical obstacles. Even strongly pro-European universities remain constrained by national legislation, accreditation arrangements, funding systems and administrative capacity.

| Commercialisation of education

Attitudes towards commercialisation reflect contrasting national understandings of higher education.

The interviews reveal fundamentally different views of whether higher education should be treated as a public good or as an activity that can also generate

institutional income. For example, according to interviewees, the Swedish context is characterised by a strongly non-commercial model, in which higher education is free for domestic and EU students, and the idea of promoting paid educational opportunities to students may be perceived negatively. This approach is reinforced by extensive public support for students and a broader expectation that education should remain publicly funded. Attempts to introduce fee-based international programmes may therefore encounter cultural resistance as well as recruitment difficulties.

At UiS, in turn, the inability to charge tuition had previously limited joint degree development and made some potential partnerships less attractive. One interviewee explained: *“(…) we were not allowed to charge tuition, so our partners were not so interested when they realised we could not charge anything for it.”*

Interviewees from other national contexts also described systems in which tuition fees are an accepted part of the financial model. Finland increasingly treats fees from non-EU students as a means of covering the full cost of education, and similar fee distinctions were reported to exist in the Netherlands. At DCU, interviewees described an approach in which joint and double degree programmes are not necessarily expected to generate profit directly, but their strategic value is partly assessed through their contribution to the university’s competitive position.

Overall, the interviewees’ accounts suggest that approaches to commercialisation are shaped by national traditions and understandings of the role of the university. For some institutions, charging fees is a necessary mechanism for maintaining programmes and attracting international students. For others, it may conflict with deeply rooted ideas about equal access and publicly funded education. These differences can affect partner selection, programme design and tuition arrangements.

4.2. Perceived added value of joint and double degree programmes

The analysis of interviews indicates an overall perception that joint and double degree programmes generate significant added value for both higher education institutions and students.

The perceived value can be understood along two closely interconnected dimensions. At the institutional level, these programmes contribute to internationalisation, visibility, reputation, partnership development, and, in some cases, accreditation and ranking outcomes. At the student level, they provide forms of academic, intercultural, linguistic, and professional development arising from participation in different educational and cultural environments.

Importantly, the interviews suggest that these two dimensions reinforce one another: **joint and double degree programmes become institutionally valuable**

partly because of the distinctive opportunities they create for students, while strong international partnerships and institutional recognition further increase the attractiveness and potential benefits of participation.

| Institutional and partnership value

Joint and double degree programmes can strengthen institutional visibility, partnerships and educational capacity beyond the number of students directly involved.

The institutional value of joint and double degree programmes is particularly evident in their role as visible manifestations of international engagement and academic cooperation. In this sense, the value of a programme cannot be assessed exclusively in terms of the number of participating students.

This perspective is particularly visible in the case of UniTrento, where collaboration with prestigious French Grandes Écoles was regarded as valuable even when the number of mobile students remained limited. Erasmus Mundus programmes represent an especially pronounced version of this mechanism. Interviewees described the Erasmus Mundus label as a form of external recognition of educational quality, with one respondent characterising it as “the excellence of teaching”. Rather than functioning merely as a funding mechanism, the label therefore appears to operate symbolically as evidence that the programme has met demanding international standards and has succeeded in a highly competitive selection environment. One respondent told us: *“(…) it's a program of excellence, just one step below European University Alliances, in terms of integration, excellence and impact.”*

Interviewees also highlighted educational benefits arising from the combination of complementary institutional strengths. **Joint provision can enable universities to draw on expertise available at different partner institutions** and, in some cases, to develop programmes or interdisciplinary study opportunities that they could not offer independently. Respondents also pointed to benefits for academic staff through knowledge exchange and exposure to different teaching and assessment practices.

Long-term programme continuity further strengthens this interpretation. Several institutions included in the study described joint and double degree programmes that have been operating for well over a decade, and in some cases for more than 20 years. Such longevity suggests that the perceived value of these programmes is not exclusively linked to short-term project outcomes. Instead, **such programmes may gradually become embedded in institutional structures and relationships, creating forms of accumulated experience, trust, recognition, and international connectivity.**

This longer-term perspective also helps explain why respondents frequently accepted considerable organisational costs. One representative of the UA explicitly acknowledged this tension, stating: *“It's a lot of effort, yes, but what*

comes from that in terms of the institutions involved and the students who went through that experience, it's worthwhile.”

This reflection is analytically important because it suggests that institutions do not necessarily perceive administrative complexity as evidence of programme inefficiency. Rather, complexity may be accepted as an inherent feature of a form of international cooperation whose benefits are expected to materialise simultaneously at institutional and individual levels.

| Student learning and experience

For students, the strongest perceived added value lies in the extended experience of studying and functioning across different academic and cultural environments.

Interviewees portrayed joint and double degree programmes as qualitatively different from conventional short-term mobility because students are required to operate for extended periods within more than one academic and social environment. They encounter different educational systems, teaching approaches, institutional expectations, cultural norms, languages, and professional contexts. As a result, mobility is not understood simply as geographical movement between universities but as repeated adaptation to different institutional and cultural settings.

This repeated adaptation appears to be a key mechanism through which programmes generate broader learning outcomes. Respondents associated participation with increased openness to diversity, intercultural communication skills, cultural awareness, flexibility, independence, resilience, problem-solving abilities, teamwork, leadership, and networking capacity. These competencies are closely interrelated: learning to navigate an unfamiliar academic system, for example, simultaneously requires students to communicate across cultural boundaries, solve practical problems, manage uncertainty, and develop greater independence. Consequently, the added value of such programmes may lie less in any single competence than in the cumulative experience of having to function effectively across multiple environments.

The structured nature of joint and double degree programmes can also provide students with greater predictability than less formal forms of mobility. Interviewees noted that mobility paths and recognition arrangements may be agreed in advance, reducing uncertainty about whether study undertaken abroad will count towards the degree. A TUHH interviewee, for example, emphasised that students value knowing where they will study and that the agreed period abroad will be recognised within their programme.

Language learning forms part of this process even when the formal language of instruction is English. Examples mentioned in the interviews include studying in French within a LiU double degree programme, learning French at partner institutions, and informal language acquisition through everyday interactions with local communities. Language development therefore appears not merely as an

additional curricular outcome but as one element of deeper social and cultural integration into the host environment.

Joint and double degree programmes can generate important social and interpersonal benefits alongside academic learning. Interviewees described stronger intercultural understanding, close student communities and lasting personal relationships arising from studying across different academic and cultural environments.

The Atlantis programme, a long-running transatlantic degree initiative linking universities in Sweden, France and the United States, provides a particularly illustrative example of this interpersonal dimension. Respondents described the programme as generating not only intercultural understanding but also close student communities and lasting personal relationships. This broadens the concept of educational added value beyond formal learning outcomes and highlights the social dimension of studying across different academic and cultural environments.

Such accounts help contextualise particularly enthusiastic statements in the interviews, including the description of **international double degree programme participation as “life changing.”** Although strongly evaluative, such descriptions point to a recurring perception that the value of these programmes extends beyond obtaining an additional diploma to the broader experience of studying, integrating and adapting across different environments.

| Professional and long-term value

The benefits of joint and double degree programmes may extend beyond graduation through employability, professional access, and lasting academic and personal networks.

Respondents associated graduate employability with the combination of academic achievement, international experience, intercultural competence, language skills, mobility and, where applicable, internships or other practical experience. Possessing qualifications from more than one institution may make this profile more visible to employers, but the interviews suggest that the underlying value lies in the experiences and competencies signalled by those qualifications. One interviewee captured this developmental dimension when describing the result of participation: *“This is because they not only experience different systems and interact with diverse people and cultures, but this truly broadens their perspective and minds, making them more valuable to employers moving forward.”*

Some students were reported to select such programmes because they expected the additional qualification and international experience to differentiate them in competitive labour markets. However, the professional value of participation varies by programme and field. In some cases, it may provide direct access to opportunities across more than one national or

professional context. Interviewees discussing Franco-Spanish law programmes, for example, described the potential for graduates to operate across different legal environments, while partnerships with highly regarded institutions such as the French Grandes Écoles were associated with preparation for international careers. At master’s and doctoral levels, joint provision may also provide access to specialised expertise, research environments and international academic networks.

The benefits may also persist through the relationships formed during the programme. Respondents emphasised lasting friendships, professional contacts and alumni networks that continued after graduation.

The continued attractiveness of some long-running programmes also suggests that these effects can become self-reinforcing. UAB’s GLOBED Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s programme, for example, was reported to receive more than 2,500 applications for approximately 20 places. Sustained demand can strengthen programme visibility, while successful cohorts and alumni may in turn contribute to institutional reputation and the continued attractiveness of participation.

The interviews nevertheless suggest that **the added value of joint and double degree programmes is not uniform.** It depends on the programme, partner institutions, disciplinary context and students’ own academic and career plans. For some students, an additional qualification and extended mobility provide a clear advantage; for others, a conventional exchange may offer sufficient international experience with greater flexibility and lower commitment.

| Key areas of perceived added value of joint and double degree programmes

Stronger international profile	Enhances institutional visibility, reputation and internationalisation.
Deeper partnerships	Builds long-term cooperation, trust and stronger institutional links.
Enhanced educational offer	Combines complementary expertise across partner institutions and supports exchange of teaching practices.
Broader student development	Strengthens adaptability, independence, teamwork and problem-solving skills.
Intercultural and language skills	Develops intercultural competence through study in different academic and cultural environments.
Better career prospects	Supports employability and access to international professional and research opportunities.
Long-term networks	Creates lasting academic, professional and personal connections beyond graduation.

4.3. Challenges to introducing joint and double degree programmes

The analysis of interviews indicates that the principal difficulty associated with joint and double degree programmes lies not in any single regulatory or organisational obstacle, but in the accumulation and interaction of multiple constraints.

Institutions must simultaneously reconcile different legal frameworks, academic structures, administrative procedures, financial models, student expectations, and external political conditions. As a result, establishing and maintaining such programmes requires considerably more than an agreement between academic partners. Their viability depends on sustained institutional commitment and on the capacity of universities to coordinate procedures and resources across both organisational and national boundaries.

The interview evidence suggests an important tension between the perceived value of joint and double degree programmes and the conditions required to sustain them. Universities generally regard these programmes as valuable instruments of internationalisation, yet their implementation can often be administratively intensive, financially fragile, and accessible only to a relatively small group of students.

The central challenge is not simply how to establish a joint or double degree programme, but how to make such a programme workable over time without depending excessively on individual problem-solving, temporary funding, or unusually favourable institutional circumstances.

| Regulatory and organisational complexity

One of the most persistent barriers concerns the need to reconcile national higher education systems that remain substantially different despite processes of European harmonisation. Accreditation was one area in which these differences became particularly visible. As one respondent explained: “(...) *we had to take each master's program at each university through a separate accreditation process. It involved a huge amount of bureaucracy. In the end, it shows that national laws still carry more weight than European agreements (...).*”

Institutions participating in a common programme may operate according to different degree structures, credit requirements, graduation rules, quality assurance procedures, and accreditation regimes. Differences between integrated five-year programmes and Bachelor–Master structures provide one example, but similar problems arise in relation to the formal requirements governing programme approval and degree issuance. Consequently, curriculum design for a joint or double degree programme requires detailed negotiations over whether each partner can satisfy its own regulatory obligations within a shared programme structure.

These difficulties become particularly visible when institutional requirements intersect with national legislation. **Programme approval may involve not only universities themselves but also ministries, national accreditation agencies, and professional bodies.** Swedish institutions, for example, reported difficulties arising from the fact that European-level joint degree frameworks are not necessarily recognised automatically within national systems. Spanish institutions similarly pointed to specific legal requirements concerning the issuance of official diplomas, including the requirement for the King's signature.

This creates uncertainty not only during programme development but also at the point of graduation. Institutions must determine whether students receive one qualification or several, which institution formally issues the diploma, and how the resulting degree will be recognised in the participating countries. For example, a coordinator of a joint degree programme at the University of Twente (UT) reported that, in their programme's case, the degree diploma had to carry two institutions' stamps and four signatures in order to accommodate the formal requirements of both systems, illustrating the pragmatic adjustments sometimes needed to make a joint qualification workable across national frameworks. TUL interviewees also described cases in which students entering master's-level study under a partner system did not yet hold a separate first-cycle diploma, requiring additional documentation and consultation to establish their eligibility. **The challenge therefore lies in translating a jointly organised programme into qualification arrangements that remain compatible with different national legal frameworks.**

A similar tension can be observed in the recognition of learning outcomes. Although ECTS creates a common language for describing workload, identical credit values do not necessarily indicate equivalent content, learning outcomes, assessment methods, or academic expectations. Institutions therefore undertake detailed curriculum mapping and, in some cases, develop individual recognition matrices for particular students. Recognition becomes even more complicated in cooperation extending beyond Europe, where differences may concern not only credit systems but also grading practices, qualification frameworks, the transparency of course descriptions, and broader educational philosophies. Academic recognition is therefore not merely a technical procedure, but an ongoing form of negotiation between different educational systems.

The organisational burden associated with these arrangements is correspondingly high. Developing and maintaining a programme requires continued coordination across academic departments, international offices, registrars, quality assurance units, finance departments and other administrative structures. Interview evidence suggests that this internal coordination may in some cases be more difficult than cooperation between the international partners themselves.

This dependence on coordination also explains why specialised administrative expertise emerges as a crucial condition of programme viability. Staff must understand international regulations, admissions, mobility procedures, recognition, quality assurance, and financial management. Where such support is limited,

administrative responsibilities may be transferred to academic staff, increasing workload and making the programme more dependent on individual commitment. KTU interviewees highlighted this need directly: as one respondent noted, when questions concerning joint programmes arise, “it’s sometimes hard to find a place where you can ask questions,” pointing to the potential value of a dedicated contact point or office. Incompatible student information, admissions, transcript, and diploma systems further intensify this problem, as processes that might otherwise be standardised often require manual data exchange and case-by-case intervention.

This creates a potential vulnerability: **programmes that rely heavily on particular individuals or informal solutions may become difficult to sustain when staff change or institutional priorities shift.**

| Financial sustainability, accessibility and student demand

Financial sustainability constitutes a second major area of tension. Joint and double degree programmes require investment in programme development, administration, mobility coordination, marketing, quality assurance, and student support, yet they often involve relatively small cohorts. Institutions therefore face a structural imbalance between the intensity of resources required to operate the programme and the number of students directly participating in it. **Several universities questioned whether enrolment levels were sufficient to justify the resources involved.**

External funding can mitigate these costs, but may also create dependence. Interviewees reported concerns about programme viability and student recruitment once such support ends. One of the respondents told us: *“if there’s no scholarship funding, the master is not sustainable since very few students from abroad or even students from Europe can pay the cost of a master that forces them to live in three different countries in Europe.”*

Differences in tuition fee systems add another layer of complexity. Partner institutions may operate within free, publicly subsidised, low-fee, or full-cost models. The frequently used home-fee arrangement, in which students continue paying tuition to their home institution, can reduce financial barriers for students but depends on a reasonable balance between incoming and outgoing mobility. Persistent imbalances may create tensions because the institution receiving larger numbers of students can incur costs without receiving a corresponding share of tuition revenue.

Fee disparities also affect accessibility and mobility patterns. Tuition fees, housing expenses, travel costs and differences in living costs may make otherwise attractive destinations financially inaccessible. Opportunities formally available to an entire cohort may in practice remain accessible primarily to students able to assume the costs associated with long-term mobility. Participation itself can also be demanding. Students considering a joint or double degree programme may face longer study periods, additional academic

requirements, compulsory relocation, uncertainty regarding costs, and complex mobility arrangements. **Competitive admissions, language requirements, and high academic expectations can further narrow the eligible student population.** Low participation should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that students see little educational value in the programme. Rather, demand is shaped by the practical feasibility of committing to a multi-year international pathway. This distinction becomes particularly important when comparing joint and double degree programmes with shorter or more flexible forms of internationalisation.

Students increasingly have access to short-term exchanges, blended mobility, virtual collaboration, micro-credentials, and short international courses. These formats require less disruption to employment, family life, and established personal commitments. By contrast, joint and double degree programmes commonly require extended physical mobility and a greater degree of long-term planning and therefore represent a more intensive model of international experience than shorter and more flexible alternatives.

Personal circumstances also shape participation. Students with family responsibilities, employment commitments, health concerns or other established obligations may be unable or unwilling to relocate for prolonged periods, independently of their academic ability or interest in international education.

Language requirements can operate in a similar way. Programmes offered in widely used languages such as English, Spanish, or French have access to larger pools of students and potential partners, whereas programmes requiring advanced knowledge of less internationally widespread national languages may struggle with recruitment. Even in English-taught programmes, differences in students’ language proficiency, academic writing skills, and confidence in communication can affect preparedness for mobility.

Recruitment difficulties need to be understood against this broader background. Institutions reported challenges in communicating the benefits of obtaining two degrees, improved employability, international career opportunities, and longer-term personal development. Limited marketing resources further constrain visibility, leaving some programmes dependent on student ambassadors, alumni and personal networks.

The difficulty of communicating programme value may therefore reflect a more fundamental issue: many of the benefits associated with joint and double degree programmes are long-term and experiential, while the costs to students are immediate and highly visible.

Additional study requirements, relocation, financial expenditure, and disruption to employment can be assessed before enrolment, whereas intercultural development, professional networks, and career advantages are necessarily uncertain and often materialise only later.

External vulnerability and long-term programme viability
The long-term sustainability of joint and double degree programmes is also affected by factors over which universities have limited control.

Changes in higher education legislation, visa regulations, tuition fee policy, mobility funding and wider political attitudes towards internationalisation can alter the feasibility of established arrangements relatively quickly. International programmes are particularly exposed to such changes because their operation depends simultaneously on the regulatory conditions of more than one country. A policy change affecting only one partner may therefore create consequences for the entire programme.

Geopolitical developments introduce a more severe form of vulnerability. Wars, diplomatic tensions, sanctions, and political instability may interrupt or terminate partnerships independently of their academic quality or institutional success. The interviews included examples of collaborations being suspended or discontinued due to developments beyond the participating universities’ control. These external risks interact with the institutional vulnerabilities described above.

A programme supported by secure internal funding, well-established administrative structures, diversified recruitment, and strong institutional commitment may be better able to respond to temporary disruption than one dependent on a single grant, a small number of staff members, or a fragile mobility balance.

Key challenges to introducing joint and double degree programmes

Regulatory and legal complexity	Different national rules, accreditation systems and degree structures make joint programme design and implementation difficult.
Academic alignment and recognition	Differences in curricula, learning outcomes, grading systems and recognition requirements require extensive coordination between partners.
Administrative burden	Programmes demand substantial coordination across academic and administrative units and often rely on specialised staff or individual commitment.
Financial sustainability	High development and operating costs, small cohorts and dependence on external funding can make programmes difficult to sustain.
Accessibility and student demand	Tuition fees, mobility costs, language requirements and long periods abroad can limit participation and reduce student demand.
Long-term external vulnerability	Changes in legislation, funding, visa rules, political conditions or geopolitical developments can threaten programme continuity.

4.4. Perspectives on the Joint European Degree (Label)
One of the topics explored during the study concerned respondents’ attitudes towards the concepts of the Joint European Degree and the Joint European Degree Label (hereafter the Label). **The level of awareness varied considerably among respondents.** While some participants were familiar with the policy discussion, a substantial number knew the concepts only in broad terms.

This difference in prior knowledge should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. Some of the views presented below were based on respondents’ existing experience and longer-term engagement with discussions around European higher education policy, while others emerged as more immediate reactions formed during the interviews themselves. In a small number of cases, respondents’ descriptions of the initiatives or their requirements were not fully consistent with the policy framework; such comments are therefore treated as perceptions rather than technical assessments. Despite these differences, several common themes and recurring perspectives could be identified across institutions. The following sections present the most important positive perceptions, concerns and challenges associated with the Joint European Degree and the Label.

Overall perceptions of the initiative
A number of respondents viewed the Label, and in some cases the broader Joint European Degree initiative, as an important step towards deeper European integration in higher education. For these respondents, the concept aligns with the long-term development of the European Higher Education Area and reflects broader trends towards increased cooperation between universities across Europe. Importantly, this positive attitude did not imply uncritical support. Even among respondents who strongly supported the idea, concerns and practical questions were frequently raised regarding implementation, governance and feasibility. These challenges were generally perceived as issues to be addressed rather than as reasons to abandon the initiative.

Respondents also identified more concrete potential benefits. Some saw the Label as a way to strengthen the international visibility and attractiveness of European higher education; one participant described its potential as a source of greater “visibility” and a “seal of excellence” internationally. Others viewed the initiative as an opportunity to simplify cross-border cooperation and address recognition and coordination problems that remain despite the Bologna Process. These benefits were not perceived equally across institutions, but they help explain why several respondents supported continued development of the initiative despite practical concerns.

Institutional readiness and next steps
Institutions differed considerably in how far they had begun preparing for the Joint European Degree Label and exploring the possible Joint European Degree.

At some universities, discussion remained confined to a small number of staff and no concrete action had yet been taken. Others were already reviewing existing

programmes against the Label criteria, considering exploratory projects or preparing to apply. Existing experience with the EMJMs and other joint programmes often made the Label appear more achievable.

Several respondents nevertheless stressed that implementation would take time and depend on institutional leadership, programme-level engagement and clearer guidance. Overall, the interviews suggest an uneven but growing level of preparedness across ECIU member universities rather than a common Alliance-wide position.

| Joint European Degree Label: purpose and challenges

The Label was generally seen as the more immediate and feasible element of the initiative, although respondents differed on whether it would simplify current arrangements or add another administrative layer.

Respondents frequently highlighted the administrative complexity already associated with existing joint and double degree programmes, which often require universities to navigate multiple accreditation procedures and differing national requirements. As one interviewee put it, “it just adds complexity instead of fixing existing issues”. For these respondents, the value of the Label would depend on whether it reduces rather than reproduces existing complexity.

Several interviewees questioned the overall purpose and added value of the Label. They pointed out that European higher education institutions already operate within the Bologna framework and have existing mechanisms for joint and double degree programmes that are not yet fully utilised. In their view, priority should be given to improving and simplifying existing arrangements rather than creating additional complexity.

This discussion often led to a fundamental question: Is there a genuine need for the Joint European Degree Label? Respondents observed that student interest in joint degree programmes remains relatively limited, and some interviewees questioned who the initiative is ultimately intended to benefit. Some wondered whether it primarily serves students by expanding educational opportunities or whether its main value lies in institutional prestige and the ability of universities to showcase participation in innovative European projects.

Within this perspective, **several respondents expressed scepticism regarding the potential attractiveness of the Label for students.** They argued that programme quality, employability, location, language and financial considerations are likely to matter more in student choices than an additional European quality label. Others, however, regarded the Label as a potentially useful quality signal or source of prestige.

| Label criteria: implementation concerns

Respondents also reflected on the criteria for the Joint European Degree Label. While some requirements were regarded as relatively straightforward and

achievable, others raised more practical questions regarding their interpretation and implementation.

One practical concern related to student accommodation. Respondents from universities facing severe housing shortages questioned how incoming students could be adequately supported when accommodation was already difficult to secure for existing student populations. Although accommodation is not a separate Label criterion, these concerns arose in relation to the broader expectation of equitable access to student services.

A second challenge related to the multilingualism criterion. Participants observed that language already constitutes a significant factor influencing student mobility. Students often prefer destinations where courses are taught in widely spoken languages such as English, Spanish, or German, while cooperation involving less commonly spoken national languages can be more difficult to establish and sustain.

As a result, respondents raised a number of practical questions regarding the integration of multilingualism into Joint European Degree Label programmes. Should students be required to take courses delivered in national languages? Should language learning be integrated into the curriculum itself, even when unrelated to the programme’s academic content? Alternatively, should language classes be offered as optional extracurricular activities? **While respondents generally supported the principle of linguistic diversity, many felt that the practical implications of this criterion remain insufficiently defined.** One respondent also pointed to a potential tension between the emphasis on physical mobility and environmental sustainability.

Finally, interviewees commented on the criterion relating to “European values”. While many agreed with the importance of promoting shared values, respondents noted that the concept itself remains relatively broad and open to interpretation. Questions were raised regarding which values should be considered specifically European and who should be responsible for defining them. Some participants expressed concerns that different countries, institutions, and stakeholders may hold differing views on this issue.

Furthermore, **some respondents questioned how the promotion of European values should be integrated into programmes with strongly specialised or technical content.** For example, in fields such as engineering, mathematics, or natural sciences, it may be less obvious how such values can be incorporated into teaching and learning activities without appearing artificial or disconnected from the subject matter. Consequently, participants called for greater clarity regarding both the meaning of this criterion and the practical expectations associated with its implementation.

Overall, however, the criteria were not viewed as uniformly difficult; several respondents considered many of them broadly achievable within existing joint programmes.

| Joint European Degree: key challenges

While the Label was generally viewed as more immediately feasible, respondents were considerably more cautious about the possible future Joint European Degree.

As noted in Chapter 2, the Council of the European Union has not yet made a final decision on the possible introduction of a Joint European Degree. Against this background, our respondents generally viewed it as a more ambitious and less immediately feasible prospect than the Label, because it could require deeper alignment across national systems and clearer arrangements for awarding and recognising a common qualification.

Alongside supportive attitudes, respondents identified a number of significant challenges that could hinder the future implementation of the Joint European Degree.

One of the most frequently discussed concerns related to the political feasibility of the initiative: several participants questioned whether European Union member states would ultimately be able to reach agreement on such a far-reaching reform. The issue was often framed not primarily as a matter of university policy but as a broader political question involving national governments, regulatory frameworks, and competing visions of European integration.

For example, participants at UT pointed to Dutch policy efforts to reduce English-taught provision and strengthen Dutch-language education. Such developments were seen as potentially limiting the internationalisation strategies of universities and creating tensions with initiatives that seek to increase European cooperation and educational integration. Similar observations were made by respondents from other institutions, who referred to growing Eurosceptic sentiment and calls for greater national autonomy in parts of Europe. These comments referred to national political trends rather than the positions of the universities themselves.

Beyond concerns regarding political support, respondents also questioned how much authority member states would be willing to transfer to the European level in the field of higher education. In its most ambitious interpretation, the future Joint European Degree could require a substantial harmonisation of higher education systems and a shift of certain responsibilities from national authorities to European structures. Several respondents expressed doubts about whether governments would be prepared to accept such a transfer of competence.

Questions were also raised regarding institutional autonomy. Accreditation systems differ significantly across Europe. In some countries, accreditation is carried out by external agencies, while in others universities enjoy various forms of self-accreditation and therefore have a higher degree of regulatory independence. Institutions operating within self-accreditation systems were particularly attentive to the possibility that a Joint European Degree framework could introduce additional external requirements and potentially reduce

institutional autonomy. While this concern did not necessarily translate into opposition to the concept itself, respondents emphasised that implementation should not undermine existing systems that are already functioning effectively.

A smaller but distinct concern related to institutional identity. At institutions with strong established degree brands, some interviewees anticipated resistance to a European-level qualification and worried that existing institutional identity could be “diluted or diminished”.

4.5. Alternative forms of educational cooperation

Although joint and double degree programmes, together with the emerging Joint European Degree initiative, formed a key focus of the interviews, participants generally demonstrated greater familiarity with, and often stronger interest in, the ECIU educational offer and other innovative forms of educational collaboration already operating within their institutions.

These projects vary in scale, format, and institutional setting, but commonly emphasise interdisciplinary, skills-oriented, and flexible forms of learning.

The following section considers these developments in two parts: first, reflections on the ECIU educational offer; and second, selected innovative initiatives developed independently by individual member universities within international, national, regional, or institutional contexts.

| ECIU educational offer: strengths and limitations

The ECIU educational offer reflects concepts that have become hallmarks of ECIU University, including flexible learning pathways, modular learning, and more personalised forms of international learning.

The main strength of ECIU’s educational portfolio lies in offering shorter, flexible learning experiences that can be undertaken alongside traditional degree programmes and, unlike joint and double degree programmes and long-term exchanges, do not require a long-term commitment. ECIU University’s Digital Experience Platform (DXP), Engage, provides learners with access to challenges and micro-modules developed by academic staff from across the Alliance, which they can select according to their individual interests and needs. These modules are delivered primarily in online or blended formats, with the latter combining online and on-site learning. They bring learners from different disciplines together to work on real-life problems, often in collaboration with external stakeholders.

Interviewees familiar with ECIU generally viewed it very positively and reported growing awareness among students and staff. Learners were reported to value particularly the opportunity to apply their knowledge in international and interdisciplinary settings, develop practical skills and engage with students from different backgrounds.

Short-term mobility within the blended learning format was viewed slightly more ambivalently. One participant questioned whether the administrative effort

involved was proportionate to the short duration and limited credit value of the mobility period, and suggested that a semester abroad provides a deeper international experience. Other interviewees, however, regarded short-term mobility as an important alternative for students who cannot spend a full semester or academic year abroad because of employment, family responsibilities, or other commitments. From this perspective, short-term formats do not replace traditional Erasmus+ exchanges but broaden access to international learning for students who might otherwise be unable to participate.

Despite these positive assessments, interview data suggest that the wider impact of the ECIU educational offer remains somewhat constrained by several implementation challenges. **A recurring challenge is the uneven integration of ECIU activities into formal curricula.** At some universities, ECIU modules count as electives and contribute to degree completion, which appears to increase participation. Elsewhere, they remain extracurricular and must be completed on top of the regular programme. Interviewees noted that *“it’s not so easy to recognise the work in terms of credits” and that “many are afraid ECIU learning won’t be recognised.”* Where formal recognition is absent, students may be less likely to participate, particularly when they already have demanding study schedules.

A related concern is that **ECIU University currently attracts a relatively narrow group of highly motivated and internationally oriented learners.** One interviewee described this group as follows: *“We feel that we are appealing to a sort of niche of students – very, very targeted and self-motivated students... they want to do something different from traditional learning, from staying in the classroom.”* Thus, although ECIU opportunities may be widely available, participation may remain concentrated among students who are already well positioned to take advantage of them.

| Innovative educational initiatives beyond ECIU

The interviews revealed a diverse range of initiatives through which ECIU member universities are seeking to make learning more flexible, practice-oriented, and responsive to changing student and labour-market needs. Although these initiatives differ in scale and institutional context, they share a common emphasis on interdisciplinarity, practical experience, and closer cooperation with external partners.

Micro-credentials constitute one of the most developed areas of experimentation. Several universities have introduced modular offers intended to support lifelong learning and the development of future-oriented skills. Importantly, some institutions now issue micro-credentials for their own educational provision independently of the ECIU University offer, while also considering how these courses might contribute to the ECIU educational portfolio. Interviewees also highlighted the potential of micro-credentials to support university–industry collaboration. **Compared with full joint degree provision, short modular courses can be developed more readily with external partners** and tailored to the needs of particular companies or professional groups. They can therefore reach

a larger and more diverse group of learners, strengthen the university’s visibility among employers, and create additional revenue opportunities. This makes micro-credentials particularly attractive as a format for continuing professional development and university–industry cooperation.

One particularly developed example concerned a **university-wide micro-credentials portfolio created through a nationally administered, EU-funded programme at UA.** As one of the interviewees explained, *“the micro-credentials were created in interaction with the companies and municipalities around the region (...) to increase the economic growth and the skills development of the environment around the university.”* Academic units developed a large number of offers, some tailored to the needs of particular companies and attended by their employees. This example illustrates how publicly supported lifelong learning can connect university expertise with local economic and skills-development priorities. Although the courses carried a fee, employees of partner organisations could receive scholarships covering the full cost. The interviewee also noted that some of these micro-credentials could contribute to the development of ECIU University’s flexible learning pathways, creating a bridge between locally developed provision and alliance-level educational opportunities.

Another ambitious example is the **progressive introduction of challenge-based learning into bachelor’s programmes, currently being piloted at UAB.** The objective is to introduce a substantial challenge-based component across degree programmes, bringing together students from different disciplines to work on shared problems as a recognised part of their studies. The initiative is intended to develop competences that students may not acquire through standard disciplinary courses, while making elective provision more engaging and relevant. Interviewees reported that students who participate in the pilot phase of the initiative are generally highly satisfied, suggesting that challenge-based learning can provide a valuable bridge between disciplinary knowledge, interdisciplinary cooperation and practical problem-solving.

At TUHH, in turn, several initiatives link academic study with professional practice. One example is the **“dual@TUHH”, a programme in which students combine university education with an apprenticeship in a company,** gaining sustained workplace experience alongside their formal studies. The programme is highly intensive, requiring students to alternate between university and company work over three years, often with limited time for weekends or holidays. It nevertheless offers substantial practical experience and close links with employers, although the level of commitment required may not suit all learners. Another TUHH initiative, “Fishing for Experience”, connects students with companies through supervised, challenge-based projects. Participants work on real-world problems while receiving guidance in project planning and implementation. One interviewee described it as *“a little bit what ECIU University is doing, but on a national level”*, highlighting its similar emphasis on collaboration between students and external organisations.

The initiatives described above represent only a selection of the educational collaborations identified in the interviews. Several respondents emphasised that their universities are also involved in numerous other regional, national and international partnerships beyond ECIU, often using different models of cooperation. As one interviewee put it, *“we have more projects than just ECIU”*, referring to shared course catalogues and micro-credential initiatives developed with other universities.

Taken together, these initiatives point to a broader interest in more flexible, personalised, and practice-oriented education across several ECIU member universities. Their further development will depend on how successfully they can be embedded within existing curricular, legal, and administrative structures and sustained beyond their initial project-based or externally funded phases.

4.6. Summary

The interview findings point to several recurring patterns across ECIU member universities:

-  **Institutional approaches to joint and double degree programmes vary considerably.** They are strategically important at some universities, while elsewhere they remain more peripheral or limited in scale. At the same time, more flexible forms of international learning, including micro-credentials, challenge-based learning and short-term mobility, are becoming increasingly prominent.
-  **Joint and double degree programmes are widely seen as valuable.** Interviewees associated them with stronger international partnerships, institutional visibility and educational complementarity, as well as with intercultural, linguistic and professional development for students.
-  **Joint and double degree programmes are demanding to develop and sustain.** Regulatory differences, accreditation and recognition requirements, administrative workload, financial sustainability, mobility costs and differing student circumstances can all affect programme development and long-term viability. Sustaining such programmes therefore requires institutional commitment, specialist expertise and sufficient resources.
-  **Awareness of the Joint European Degree agenda is uneven.** Some respondents were closely familiar with the initiative, while others knew it only in broad terms. Institutional readiness also varied, from limited internal discussion to active consideration of the Label criteria and possible applications.

-  **The Label was generally seen as more immediately feasible than the possible future Joint European Degree.** At the same time, respondents questioned whether it would genuinely simplify existing arrangements, whether it would create sufficient added value for students, and whether it might introduce another layer of complexity.
-  **ECIU University is broadening its engagement without changing its core educational focus.** Flexible Learning Pathways, micro-credentials, challenge-based learning and other flexible forms of education remain central to the Alliance’s strategy. At the same time, selected ECIU member universities are participating in two projects funded under the European Degree Exploratory Action, reflecting growing engagement with the Joint European Degree agenda. This should not be interpreted as an Alliance-wide move towards a joint degree programme: at the time of writing, no such programme is planned in the near future.



SURVEY

5. Survey findings

The survey provides a closer look at individual joint and double degree programmes across ECIU member universities, complementing the broader institutional perspectives captured through the interviews. The findings presented below focus on the characteristics of the programmes represented in the survey, their alignment with the Joint European Degree Label criteria, and respondents' views on the Label and future cooperation within ECIU.

The findings are based on 25 responses from nine ECIU member universities. Academic coordinators and administrative coordinators each represented 40% of respondents, while the remaining 20% were responsible for several joint or double degree programmes. Given the small and unevenly distributed sample, the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative of ECIU as a whole.

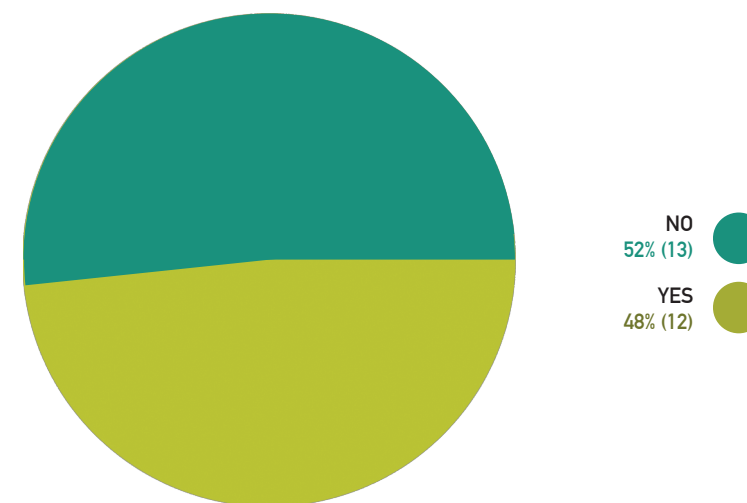
5.1. Individual programme characteristics

All programmes were jointly delivered by institutions from different countries. Most involved only EU partners, while 20% also included institutions from outside the EU.

In 48% of the programmes, at least one of the partner institutions was another ECIU member university, while in 52% no additional ECIU member was involved.

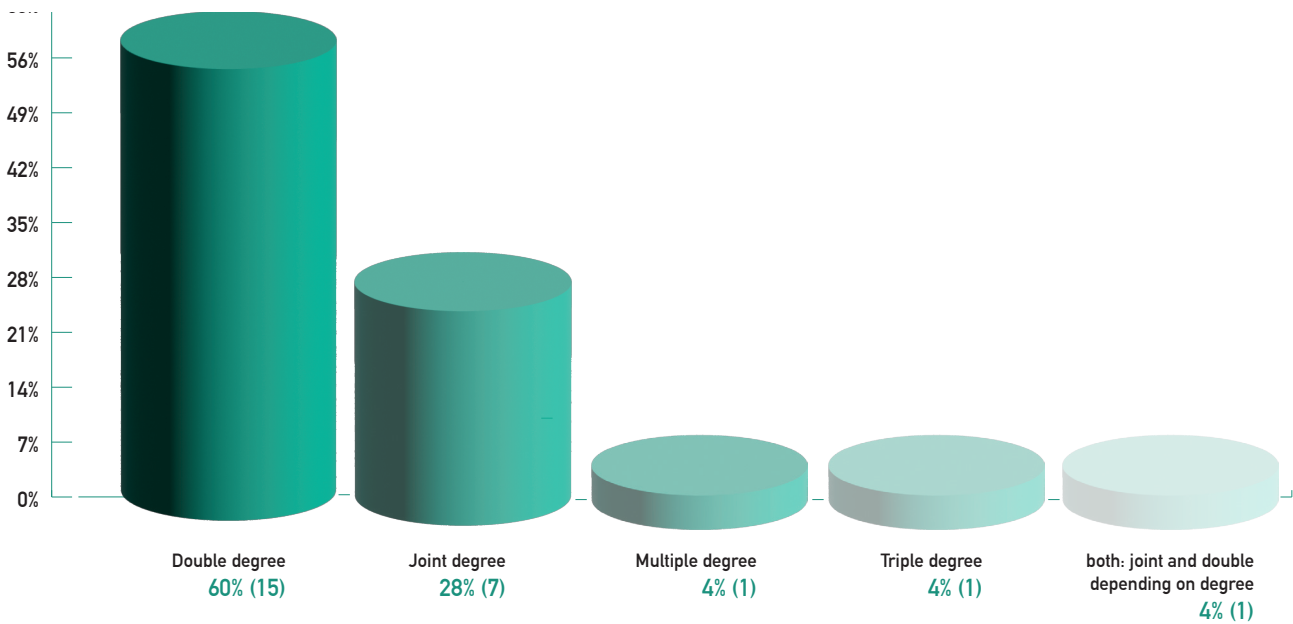
This indicates that cooperation between ECIU member universities is already present in a substantial share of the surveyed programmes, although many programmes continue to rely on partnerships developed outside the Alliance.

| Are any of these higher education institutions also members of the ECIU alliance?



In 76% of cases, the learning outcomes were jointly agreed by all partner institutions. Double degrees were the most common type of qualification, reported by 60% of respondents, while 28% offered a joint degree. The remaining programmes used other models, such as triple or multiple degrees.

Does the programme lead to a joint degree, double degree or another type of qualification?



Participation in Erasmus Mundus was almost evenly divided, with 48% of programmes included in the scheme. Most respondents, 92%, confirmed that the qualification was legally valid in all co-awarding countries and provided the same academic and professional rights as a national degree.

The most important findings concern the level of academic integration, cooperation within ECIU and the legal status of the qualifications. **The high level of legal recognition indicates that most programmes have a strong formal basis.** However, the fact that 24% of programmes do not have jointly agreed learning outcomes may point to limited curricular integration. It is also noticeable that slightly more than half of the programmes did not involve another ECIU member university as a partner. This may indicate potential for extending existing partnerships, connecting established programmes with other ECIU universities and strengthening cooperation across the Alliance.

5.2. Alignment with the Label Criteria

In the second section of the survey, respondents were asked to assess the extent to which their programmes comply with the Joint European Degree Label criteria. **The results indicate that only a very limited number of criteria are currently met by all existing programmes represented in the survey.** Universally fulfilled criteria include the requirement that the programme is offered by at least two higher education institutions from at least two different EU Member States. In addition, all programmes at EQF levels 6 and 7 confirmed compliance with the mobility requirement of at least 30 ECTS completed through physical mobility at one or more partner institutions, while all doctoral-level programmes (EQF level 8) reported meeting the requirement of at least six months of physical mobility. Beyond these criteria, however, respondents identified varying degrees of challenges related to the implementation of the Joint European Degree Label framework.

As noted earlier, the Joint European Degree Label applies to joint programmes leading to a joint degree. As shown in the earlier overview of programme types, most of the programmes represented in the survey do not currently fulfil this criterion. This is important when interpreting the results below, as a substantial part of the sample consists of double or multiple degree arrangements that would not, in their current form, fall within the scope of the Label.

Despite these challenges, a number of criteria received relatively high levels of positive responses. The strongest results were observed for elements related to the promotion of European values, joint programme design and delivery, student engagement, multilingualism and digital competence development. In particular, 18 respondents agreed that their programmes are jointly designed and jointly delivered by all participating higher education institutions. An equally high number of respondents stated that their programmes adhere to the fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area, including academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance, and the promotion of democratic citizenship and common European values.

Below, we present the table of results for each criterion¹¹:

Criterion	Yes	No	Partly	Unsure
The programme is offered by at least two higher education institutions from at least two different EU Member States.	25	0	0	0
The programme is jointly designed and jointly delivered by all the higher education institutions involved.	18	6	0	1
The programme leads to the award of a joint degree.	10	15	0	0
The programme has joint policies, procedures and/or arrangements defining curriculum planning and delivery, as well as all organisational and administrative matters. Students' representatives are part of the decision-making process to define the joint policies and procedures and/or arrangements.	12	9	0	4
Internal and external Quality Assurance is conducted in accordance with the ESG. The HEIs, the field of study or the programme are evaluated by a quality assurance agency registered in the EQAR or an EU agency fully implementing the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.	15	3	0	7
The programme is evaluated using the standards of the European Approach.	16	3	0	6
The programme monitors graduates through a graduate tracking system or using data collected by the European Higher Education Sector Observatory.	9	6	0	10
The programme's arrangements include embedded interdisciplinarity and/or research-based learning components, tailored to the nature and circumstances of the joint programme.	16	3	0	6
A joint Diploma Supplement is issued to students.	12	10	0	1
The programme describes the learning outcomes and credits in line with the ECTS Users' Guide.	14	3	0	6

¹¹ Note: responses to the criterion concerning the award of a joint degree differ from the programme-type classifications reported in Section 5.1 because the figures derive from separate survey questions.

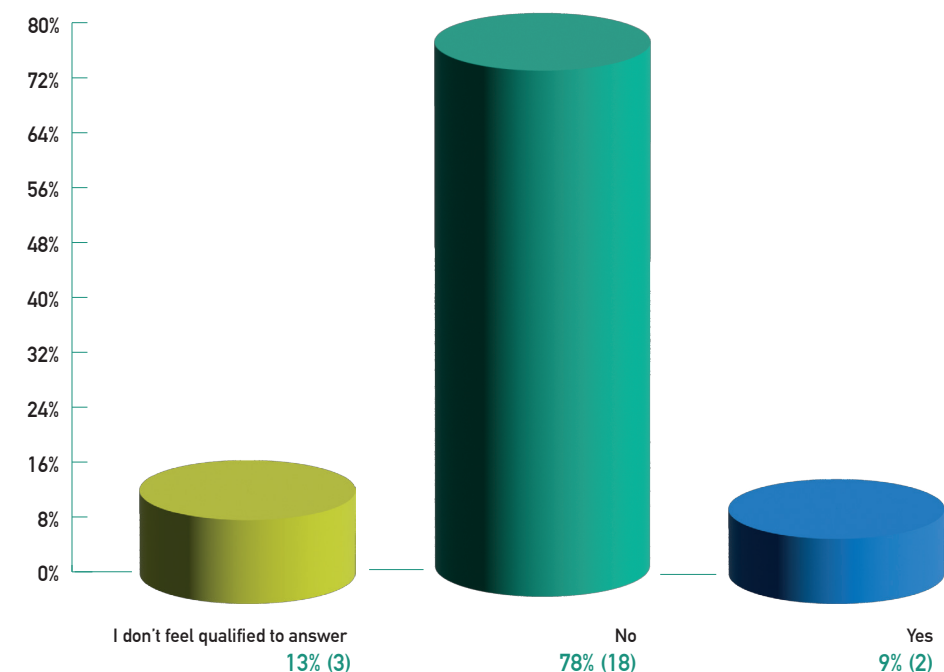
The programme offers student physical mobility of at least 30 ECTS (that can be split over several stays) at one or more partner institution(s).	23	0	0	0
The programme has a policy offering alternatives for students who are unable to travel, such as virtual exchanges and/or blended mobility.	2	18	0	3
The programme offers at least six months of physical mobility at one or more partner institution(s).	2	0	0	0
The programme has a policy offering alternatives for students who are unable to travel.	1	1	0	0
Dissertations are supervised by at least 2 supervisors and co-evaluated by co-supervisors or a committee with members from at least 2 different institutions located in 2 different countries.	0	2	0	0
The programme's arrangements include a commitment to respect the principles of the European Charter for Researchers.	0	2	0	0
The programme is designed and continuously enhanced and delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in the learning process. Assessment of students reflects this approach.	17	2	6	0
The programme has joint policies for students and staff to have access to relevant services in all participating higher education institutions under conditions equivalent to those for all enrolled students and local staff.	16	5	4	0
The programme's arrangements foresee opportunities to broaden the learning experience of students beyond the academic context, tailored to the nature and circumstances of the programme, including labour market requirements incorporating inter-sectoral components or activities and development of transversal skills.	11	4	10	0
The programme's arrangements include opportunities for students to develop adequate digital skills and competence, tailored to the nature and circumstances of the programme.	17	3	5	0
The programme's arrangements adhere to the values of the EHEA (academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance, public responsibility for higher education, and public responsibility of higher education) and include a commitment to promote common European values and democratic citizenship.	18	2	5	0
The programme's arrangements offer opportunities to equip each student with language skills through exposure to at least 2 different EU languages during learning activities or mobility.	17	3	5	0
The programme's arrangements include a commitment to wide participation by fostering diversity, equality, and inclusion and by adopting tailored measures to support students and staff with fewer opportunities.	15	3	7	0
The programme's arrangements include policies and actions related to environmental sustainability and implement measures to minimise the environmental footprint of its activities, and foresee opportunities for students to develop adequate green skills and competences, tailored to the nature and circumstances of the programme.	11	6	8	0

The results presented above indicate that several Joint European Degree Label criteria were less consistently met by the programmes represented in the survey. One such example is the criterion stating that the programme has joint policies, procedures and/or arrangements defining curriculum planning and delivery, as well as all organisational and administrative matters, and that students' representatives are part of the decision-making process. While 12 respondents reported that their programmes met this requirement, nine indicated that the criterion was not fulfilled. Similarly, the criterion requiring that a joint Diploma Supplement is issued to students revealed a substantial divide among respondents. Twelve participants reported compliance with this requirement, while ten indicated that their programmes did not provide a joint Diploma Supplement.

Eleven respondents reported that their programmes provided opportunities to broaden students' learning experiences through activities linked to labour market needs, inter-sectoral cooperation and the development of transversal skills, while a further ten reported partial fulfilment of this criterion. The sustainability-related criterion showed a similar pattern. Eleven respondents reported that their programmes met the requirement, while eight indicated partial fulfilment. These results suggest relatively broad but not yet consistent alignment with these criteria across the surveyed programmes.

The criterion receiving the largest number of negative responses concerned inclusive mobility arrangements. The requirement that the programme has a policy offering alternatives for students who are unable to travel, such as virtual exchanges and/or blended mobility received the largest number of negative responses. Eighteen respondents stated that their programmes did not currently fulfil this criterion.

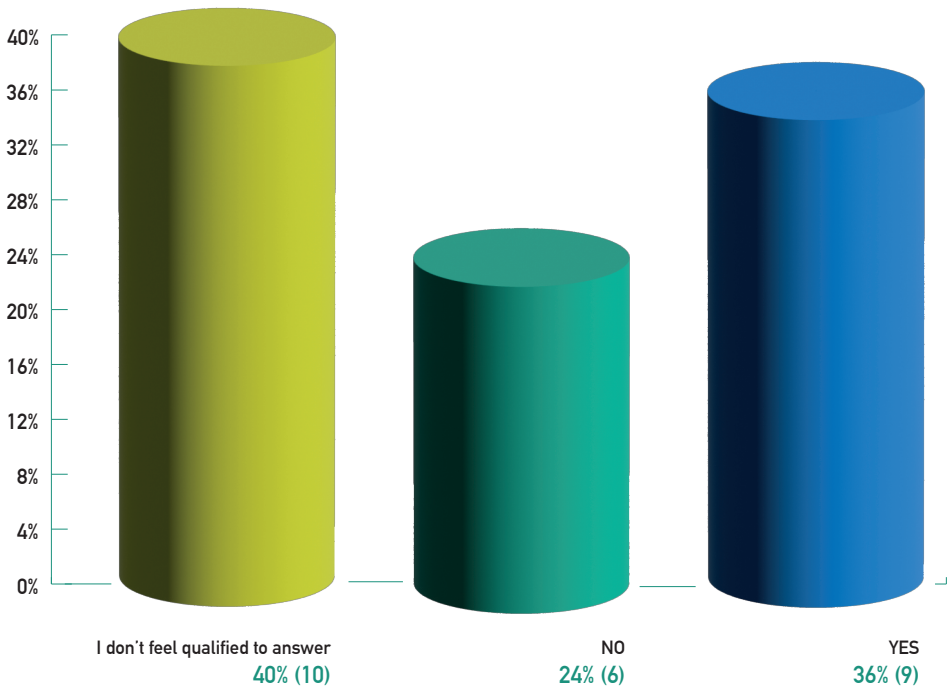
| The programme has a policy offering alternatives for students who are unable to travel, such as virtual exchanges and/or blended mobility.



Among the two EQF level 8 programmes represented in the survey, neither met the criterion requiring dissertations to be supervised by at least two supervisors and co-evaluated by supervisors or committee members from at least two different institutions located in different countries. Neither programme reported meeting the criterion requiring a formal commitment to respect the principles of the European Charter for Researchers.

Finally, **graduate tracking was the criterion respondents found most difficult to evaluate**. When asked whether the programme monitors graduates through a graduate tracking system or using data collected by the European Higher Education Sector Observatory, ten respondents indicated that they did not feel sufficiently qualified to answer. Nine respondents reported that the criterion was fulfilled, while six indicated that it was not.

| The programme monitors graduates through a graduate tracking system or using data collected by the European Higher Education Sector Observatory.

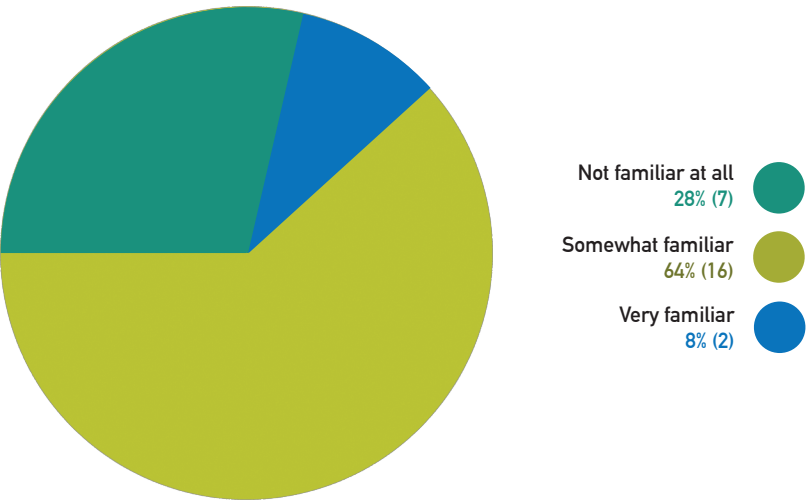


5.3. Views on the Joint European Degree Label

Questions 14–21 examined respondents’ familiarity with the Joint European Degree agenda, institutional plans and expected support needs.

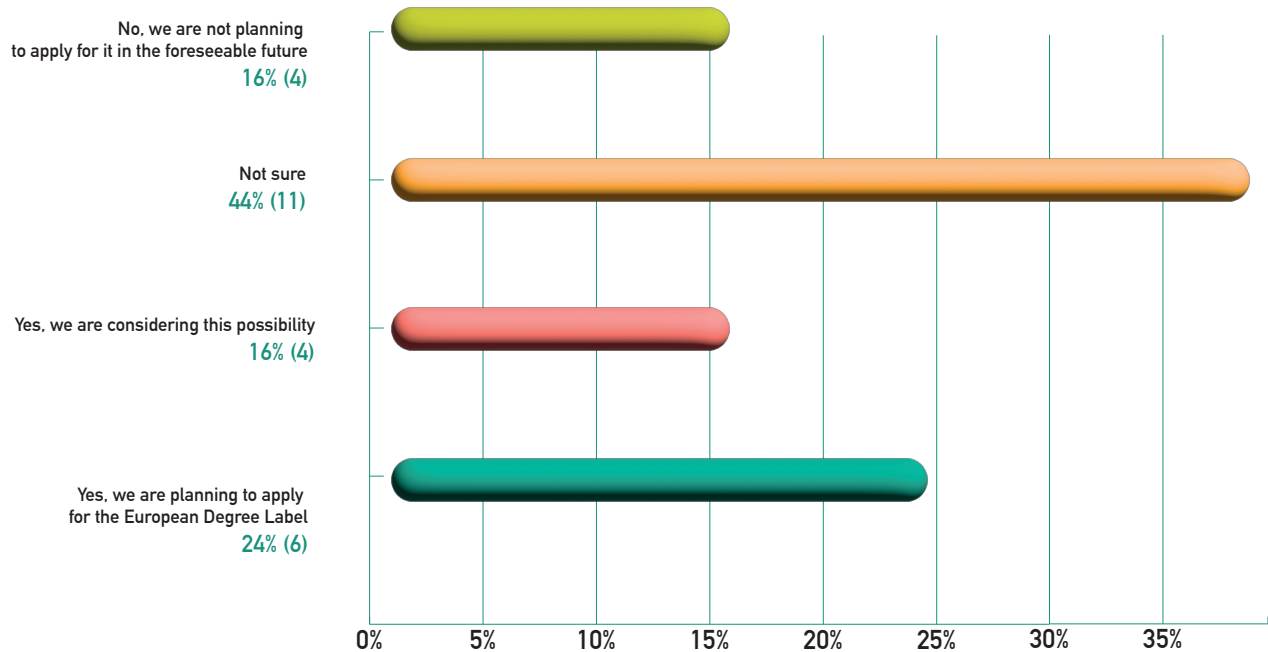
Most respondents were somewhat familiar with the Joint European Degree Label and the Joint European Degree (64%), while 28% were not familiar with them at all and only 8% were very familiar.

| Prior to completing this survey, how familiar were you with the concepts of the European Degree Label and the European Degree?



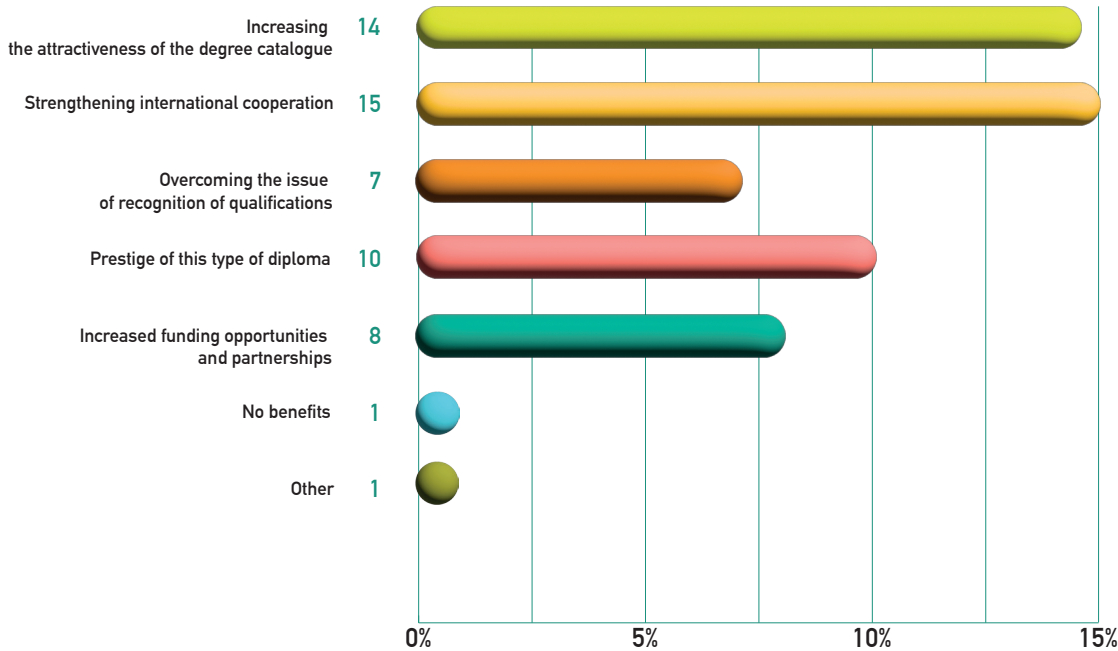
Institutional plans remained uncertain: 44% of respondents did not know whether their institution intended to apply for the Label. However, 24% reported that an application was planned and a further 16% stated that it was being considered.

| Does your institution plan to apply for the European Degree Label for the degree programme you coordinate?



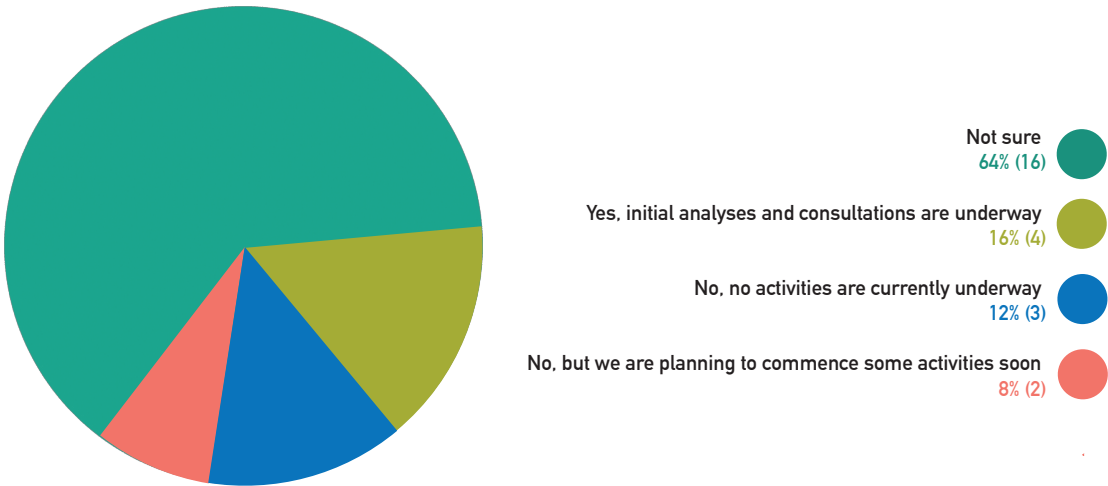
The most frequently expected benefits were stronger international cooperation (68%) and a more attractive degree offer (64%). Prestige, improved recognition of qualifications and access to funding or partnerships were also commonly selected.

| How do you think your university would benefit from obtaining the European Degree Label?



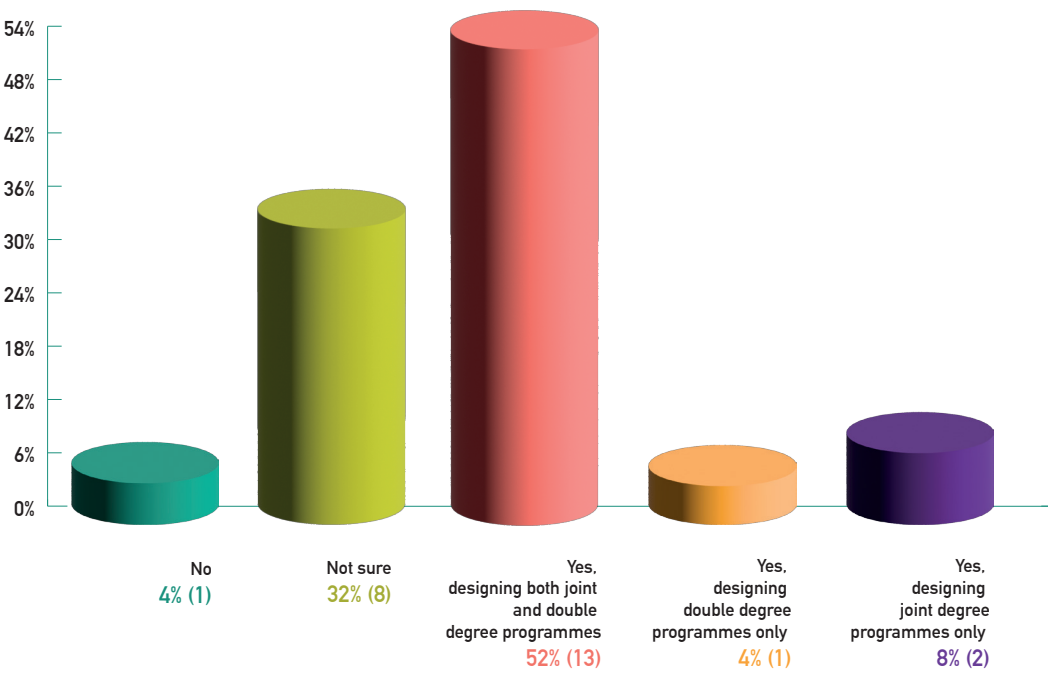
Awareness of ongoing institutional activities was also limited. 64% of respondents were unsure whether any preparations had begun, while 24% confirmed that initial activities were either already underway or planned in the near future. These results point to limited visibility of institutional preparations and an uneven level of readiness at programme level, rather than to a lack of interest in the Label.

| Are any activities already underway at your institution in regard to the European Degree Label/European Degree?



The most frequently requested form of support for implementing the Label was training for academic and administrative staff, followed by legal and organisational assistance and practical guidelines. Most respondents believed that support should be provided at both national and European levels.

| In your opinion, should developing joint and/or double degree programmes co-designed by ECIU member universities become a strategic priority for the ECIU alliance?



More than half of respondents (52%) supported making both joint and double degree programmes co-designed by ECIU member universities a strategic priority for the Alliance. A further 12% supported prioritising either joint or double degree programmes, while 32% were unsure. Only 4% did not consider such cooperation a strategic priority.

The findings point to a gap between general interest in the Joint European Degree agenda and institutional readiness to act. Respondents identified potential benefits, particularly for international cooperation and the attractiveness of degree programmes, but many were unable to confirm whether their institutions planned to apply for the Label or had already begun preparatory work. This suggests that the initiative may not yet be widely communicated at programme level and that practical implementation arrangements remain unclear to many respondents.

The results also indicate a need for capacity-building, particularly through training, legal and organisational support and practical guidance. Support for developing joint and double degree programmes within ECIU was relatively strong, although the substantial share of uncertain responses suggests that **a common Alliance-level approach would require further discussion and clarification.**

5.4. Summary

Given the small and unevenly distributed sample, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative of ECIU as a whole. With this caveat in mind, the survey points to several recurring patterns among the programmes represented in the sample:

-  **The surveyed programmes represent a diverse range of models of international cooperation.** Double degrees were the most common type of qualification, while joint degrees accounted for a smaller share of the sample. Almost half of the programmes involved another ECIU member university, while many continued to rely primarily on partnerships developed outside the Alliance.
-  **Alignment with the Joint European Degree Label criteria is uneven.** Some requirements were widely met, particularly those relating to cross-border cooperation, physical mobility, joint programme design and delivery, European values, student engagement, multilingualism and digital competence development. Other criteria were met less consistently.
-  **Many of the surveyed programmes would not currently fall within the scope of the Label.** A substantial part of the sample consisted of double or multiple degree arrangements rather than joint programmes leading to a joint degree. The survey therefore captures both programmes potentially eligible for the Label and other established forms of international degree cooperation.
-  **Inclusive mobility arrangements emerged as a particularly weak area of alignment.** Eighteen respondents reported that their programmes did not have a policy offering alternatives, such as virtual exchanges or blended mobility, for students unable to travel. Joint administrative arrangements, the issuing of a joint Diploma Supplement and graduate tracking also showed uneven levels of fulfilment.
-  **Awareness of the Joint European Degree agenda is greater than practical institutional readiness.** Most respondents were at least somewhat familiar with the Joint European Degree and the Label, and many identified potential benefits, particularly stronger international cooperation and a more attractive degree offer. At the same time, substantial proportions of respondents were unsure whether their institutions intended to apply for the Label or had already begun preparations.

-  **Respondents identified a clear need for practical implementation support.** Training for academic and administrative staff was the most frequently requested form of support, alongside legal and organisational assistance and practical guidance. Most respondents expected such support to be provided at both national and European levels.
-  **There is interest in stronger joint and double degree cooperation within ECIU, but no clear consensus at programme level.** More than half of respondents supported making both joint and double degree programmes co-designed by ECIU member universities a strategic priority, while a substantial proportion remained unsure. Given the small and unevenly distributed sample, these results should be interpreted as an indication of interest rather than as an Alliance-wide position.



DISCUSSION

6. Discussion

6.1 Institutional diversity and ECIU's evolving strategy

The study conducted by Lodz University of Technology (TUL) under the NAWA "Support for European Universities Alliances" programme comprised 34 in-depth interviews with 54 staff members from all 12 ECIU member universities, together with a survey addressed to coordinators of joint and double degree programmes (25 responses from 9 institutions). The purpose of this chapter is not to restate the findings already presented, but to interpret them in light of the wider European policy context – in particular the Joint European Degree initiative and the Joint European Degree Label (hereafter the Label) – and in light of the strategic evolution of ECIU University itself.

The most important finding of the qualitative component is that the ECIU Alliance – despite sharing a common strategic framework – operates as a collection of institutions with fundamentally different approaches to degree-level educational cooperation. The three broad groups of universities identified (those for whom joint and double degree programmes are an explicit strategic priority, those for whom they remain more peripheral, and those where such cooperation is marginal or receding) should not be read as a hierarchy of "better" versus "worse" internationalisation strategies. Rather, the findings suggest that the decision to invest in joint and double degree programmes is a function of a combination of contextual factors: institutional profile, leadership priorities, the national legal and accreditation system, and available administrative capacity.

This interpretation has important implications for assessing the realism of EU policy objectives regarding the Joint European Degree. EU policy – including the Blueprint for a European Degree (2024) and the Council Recommendation of May 2025 – implicitly assumes a broadly convergent trajectory for European higher education systems. The ECIU data, however, show that this diversity is underpinned not merely by differing institutional priorities, but by deeper structural differences (accreditation systems, national law, funding models) that may prove more durable than any individual rectorate's strategic declarations.

The interview findings also shed light on the origins of ECIU University's own educational model. One respondent's account – that from 2019 the Alliance deliberately chose to invest in Flexible Learning Pathways and micro-credentials rather than traditional joint programmes, owing to insufficient human resources to pursue both strategies simultaneously – may be interpreted as an important explanatory perspective rather than an incidental anecdote. This account suggests that **the lack of development of centrally coordinated joint degree provision within ECIU University itself does not reflect a lack of perceived value in such programmes, but rather a rational allocation of scarce resources during the Alliance's formative phase.** The debate surrounding the Joint European Degree now appears to be catalysing a shift towards a complementary model,

in which joint programmes supplement – rather than replace – the existing FLPs and micro-credentials portfolio. ECIU institutions’ participation in the EDL-STEP and PROCEED projects under the Erasmus+ European Degree Exploratory Action reflects this growing engagement at the operational level.

6.2 Value, costs and barriers

The analysis reveals a clear, recurring tension between the generally positive assessment of the value of joint and double degree programmes and a growing awareness of the costs of sustaining them.

Respondents consistently emphasised the value of these programmes – both institutional (visibility, prestige, accreditation) and individual (intercultural competence, adaptability, employability). At the same time, the respondents systematically pointed to a disproportionately high administrative, legal and financial burden required to establish and maintain such programmes.

This apparent tension should not be read as a contradiction but as an indicator of a specific investment logic guiding universities in this area. **Joint and double degree programmes are treated not as a mass-market product but as a strategic investment with a deferred and partly intangible return** – a return that materialises not as direct revenue but as reputational capital, partnership networks and the long-term development of graduate competencies. **This helps explain why, despite significant barriers, questions focused primarily on the scale at which such programmes should be developed and the proportionality of the effort involved relative to the number of students reached.**

An important interpretive conclusion is that the principal difficulty in developing joint and double degree programmes is not any single regulatory or organisational barrier, but the accumulation and interaction of multiple constraints simultaneously: differences in legal systems, academic structures, administrative procedures, funding models, student expectations, and external (geopolitical and political) conditions. It is particularly significant that internal institutional coordination (between academic units, international offices, finance departments and quality assurance units) can be more difficult than coordination between foreign partners. This finding shifts the analytical focus away from inter-institutional relations towards universities’ internal organisational capacity – with direct practical implications (see Chapter 7).

Equally important is the “invisibility” of coordination work revealed by the study: programmes appear to students as an integrated educational pathway, while in reality they are sustained through numerous ad hoc, manual adjustments and negotiations carried out by individual staff members. This constitutes a significant risk to programme sustainability in the event of staff turnover or shifting institutional priorities – a conclusion directly relevant to assessing the Alliance’s readiness to scale up such initiatives.

6.3 Competing models of internationalisation

The findings indicate that, owing to the requirements of long-term physical mobility, the costs of living abroad, language requirements and competitive admissions, joint and double degree programmes remain in practice accessible mainly to a narrow group of students who are simultaneously academically strong, highly motivated, internationally mobile and financially able to participate.

This finding corresponds directly to the survey data: as many as 18 of the 25 programmes surveyed have no policy offering alternatives for students unable to undertake physical mobility (such as virtual or blended mobility) – the Label criterion receiving the largest number of negative responses in the survey. This discrepancy is analytically significant in the context of the EU’s Joint European Degree agenda, which explicitly promotes inclusiveness, diversity and equal access as one of its quality criteria.

The data suggest that the joint and double degree model, in its current form – built around long-term physical mobility – is structurally difficult to reconcile with the goal of broad accessibility, unless systemic solutions (hybrid mobility, financial support, flexible pathways) are developed that go beyond the initiative of individual universities.

Related to this is one of the more significant findings of the study: respondents displayed markedly greater enthusiasm for flexible, modular forms of cooperation (micro-credentials, short-term mobility linked to ECIU modules, challenge-based learning) than for traditional joint and double degree programmes. This is not simply a matter of institutional preference; it reflects a different logic of accessibility – short, modular formats require less time, financial and personal commitment from students, making them easier to integrate with existing professional and family obligations.

It is worth noting, however, a limitation flagged by respondents themselves: the benefits of the ECIU offer (including Flexible Learning Pathways) currently remain concentrated among a relatively narrow group of “self-motivated” students, while uneven recognition of ECTS credits for participation in ECIU modules across institutions constrains the scalability of this model. This suggests that the modular model, although more accessible than joint and double degree programmes in terms of mobility costs, encounters its own accessibility barrier – this time procedural in nature (lack of formal recognition within degree programmes).

6.4 Perceptions of the Joint European Degree (Label)

Both qualitative and quantitative data reveal a consistent pattern: broad support for the general idea of deeper European integration in higher education coexists with substantial doubts about the added value of the Label as a concrete instrument relative to existing mechanisms (the Bologna Process, ECTS, existing joint programmes).

The recurring question “is there a genuine need for the Joint European Degree Label?”, together with the concern that the initiative might “add complexity instead of fixing existing issues”, points to a risk that the Label may be perceived by part of the academic and administrative community as an additional bureaucratic burden rather than as a tool that facilitates cooperation.

The survey findings indicate a similar pattern at the operational level: 64% of respondents were only “somewhat familiar” with the Joint European Degree Label and the Joint European Degree, 28% were not familiar with them at all, and only 8% reported being very familiar. 44% of respondents did not know whether their institution planned to apply for the Label, and 64% were unsure whether any institutional preparatory activities were under way. This reveals **a significant gap between the strategic level (where the Joint European Degree agenda is discussed) and the operational level (where programmes are actually coordinated and delivered) — suggesting a deficit in internal institutional communication rather than a lack of interest in the idea itself.** However, given the small and unevenly distributed survey sample, this interpretation should be treated as indicative rather than representative of ECIU as a whole.

The distribution of responses concerning specific Label criteria is particularly telling. Criteria relating to formal, structural elements of cooperation (number of EU partners, minimum ECTS mobility, alignment with EHEA values, development of digital competences) received relatively high levels of positive responses. By contrast, criteria requiring deeper administrative and legal integration (joint Diploma Supplement, joint programme-governance policies with student representation, graduate tracking) are met to a much lesser extent, or generate interpretive uncertainty (as many as 10 of 25 respondents could not say whether their programme tracks graduate outcomes).

These results indicate that administrative and systemic issues form an important part of the barriers to implementation, particularly in relation to data-management infrastructure, documentation and procedures. They should not, however, be interpreted as the only barriers: as shown in Chapter 5, many surveyed programmes do not currently fall within the scope of the Label, and alignment with several other criteria was also uneven.

6.5 Theoretical and practical significance, and limitations

From a broader perspective, the findings highlight the tension between the Europeanisation of higher education systems and the persistent autonomy and diversity of national systems — a phenomenon described in the Bologna Process literature as “convergence without unification”.

The examples cited by respondents (the requirement for a royal signature on Spanish diplomas; Tampere University’s obligation to issue a separate Finnish diploma despite the existence of a joint diploma) illustrate how formal harmonisation at EU level continues to encounter still-active, legally binding

national frameworks. These findings confirm and, in the new Joint European Degree context, refine a thesis already established in the literature on higher education internationalisation: that **institutional adaptive capacity and organisational culture play a greater role in the success of transnational cooperation than formal curricular alignment.**

A second theoretical contribution is the empirical confirmation of a mechanism whereby **the added value of joint and double degree programmes is relational and cumulative rather than purely transactional:** the benefits — both institutional and individual — do not stem from a single event (obtaining the qualification), but from a prolonged process of functioning simultaneously within multiple institutional and cultural environments, which leads to an accumulation of competencies, trust and networks.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that the effective implementation of the Label and, more broadly, of the Joint European Degree agenda within the ECIU Alliance requires intervention at three levels simultaneously:

- 1 At the level of **strategic-operational communication within universities**, so that information about the Label reaches programme coordinators rather than remaining confined to senior internationalisation management;
- 2 At the level of **administrative capacity**, through investment in specialised staff, IT systems for managing student and graduate data, and recognition procedures;
- 3 At the level of **programme design for inclusiveness**, including the development of alternatives to physical mobility.

Concrete operational recommendations arising from these conclusions are presented in Chapter 7.

Finally, **the interpretations presented above should be read in light of the methodological limitations** discussed in detail in Chapter 3 (Study limitations), in particular: the non-representative nature of the survey sample (25 responses from 9 of the 12 universities, unevenly distributed across institutions); varying levels of prior respondent knowledge of the Joint European Degree and the Label during interviews; reliance on respondent self-reports rather than an independent audit of programmes; and a shifting regulatory context (interviews were conducted between December 2025 and June 2026, i.e. before the detailed “Operational Guide for the Joint European Degree Label” had been widely disseminated). Conclusions regarding alignment with Label criteria should therefore be treated as an indicative snapshot at the time of the study rather than a formal compliance assessment.

CONCLUSIONS

7. Recommendations and conclusions

7.1 Key conclusions

This study set out to map existing approaches to joint and double degree programmes across the ECIU Alliance, to identify the main benefits, barriers and good practices associated with their development, and to assess member universities' readiness to engage with the Joint European Degree and Joint European Degree Label agenda. These aims have been fully achieved. The study confirms that:

- the ECIU Alliance is characterised by high heterogeneity in its approach to joint and double degree programmes – ranging from treating them as an explicit strategic priority to a marginal approach at other institutions;
- joint programmes are widely perceived as generating significant added value – both institutional (visibility, reputation, accreditation, partnerships) and individual (intercultural competencies, employability, networks) – although this value materialises over the long term rather than immediately;
- the main barriers to developing joint and double degree programmes are organisational-administrative and legal-regulatory in nature, rather than a lack of institutional will or perceived educational value;
- ECIU University has historically developed around Flexible Learning Pathways and micro-credentials rather than centrally coordinated joint programmes; interview evidence suggests that resource constraints in the Alliance's early development contributed to this focus rather than it reflecting a lack of interest in this form of cooperation;
- the general idea of the Joint European Degree and its Label is viewed favourably by respondents, but this is accompanied by significant scepticism regarding the genuine added value of the new instrument relative to existing mechanisms (the Bologna Process, ECTS, existing joint programmes), and by uncertainty about the long-term political feasibility of the Joint European Degree initiative;
- there is a gap between the declared interest in the Joint European Degree Label and institutions' operational readiness to implement it, manifested in limited awareness among programme coordinators and uncertainty about institutional plans.

| The contribution of the study can be summarised on three levels:

1 Empirically, it provides the first **cross-sectional picture**, at this scale, of approaches to joint and double degree programmes across the whole ECIU University, combining an institutional perspective (interviews with 54 staff members from 12 universities) with a programme-level perspective (a survey covering 25 programmes from 9 universities).

2 Methodologically, the complementary **mixed-methods design** (desk research, in-depth interviews, survey) allowed a qualitative perspective to be cross-referenced with a quantitative assessment of programmes' alignment with formal Joint European Degree Label criteria – a model that could be replicated in other European Universities alliances.

3 From a practical and policy perspective, the study provides ECIU, its member universities, and relevant European and national bodies (including the European Commission and NAWA) with a concrete, **empirically grounded diagnosis** of the barriers to implementation of the Joint European Degree Label and the wider Joint European Degree agenda.

7.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are grounded in the study's findings.

| For ECIU and its member universities:

1 Strengthen internal communication on the Joint European Degree Label and Joint European Degree. Given that 64% of survey respondents did not know whether their institution had undertaken any preparatory action on the Label, a regular information channel (e.g. periodic webinars, a newsletter) should be established, targeted directly at joint programmes' coordinators rather than solely at senior internationalisation management.

2 Invest in administrative capacity and IT systems. Given the identified difficulty in meeting criteria requiring graduate-outcome data and joint documentation (the Diploma Supplement), the development of shared or interoperable student- and graduate-information systems at Alliance level is recommended, reducing reliance on manual data exchange between partners.

3 Develop alternative-mobility policies. Given that 18 of the 25 programmes surveyed lack a policy offering alternatives for students unable to undertake physical mobility, common Alliance-level guidelines on virtual and blended mobility should be developed, which individual programmes could adapt rather than build from scratch.

4 Treat joint and double degree programmes as complementary to, not competing with, FLPs and micro-credentials. Mechanisms for recognising achievements from ECIU modules within joint programmes – and vice versa

– should be developed, so that the two cooperation models reinforce rather than compete for the same limited administrative resources.

5 Facilitate peer learning between member universities. Universities with extensive experience should be engaged as mentors or reference institutions for universities at an earlier stage of developing this form of cooperation, through a structured Alliance-wide good-practice exchange programme.

6 Provide operational clarity on the “European values” criterion. Although the values underpinning this criterion are already defined in the relevant European frameworks, Alliance-level guidance would facilitate their consistent practical implementation and help programmes demonstrate how the criterion is met, particularly in technical or specialised fields where respondents reported greater uncertainty.

| For EU institutions (European Commission, Council of the EU):

7 Simplify and clarify the Label criteria requiring deep administrative integration, in particular those concerning the joint Diploma Supplement and joint programme-governance policies, so that compliance is achievable without disproportionate administrative effort.

8 In future revisions of the Joint European Degree Label framework, consider whether a more flexible approach to the physical-mobility criterion should be introduced, including whether hybrid models could serve as an alternative pathway to meeting the requirement.

9 Strengthen communication on the added value of the Label relative to existing instruments (the Bologna Process, ECTS, existing joint programmes), to address the recurring scepticism identified in the study regarding the genuine need for a new instrument.

10 Ensure training and legal-organisational support for academic and administrative staff – identified by respondents as the most needed form of support – at both European and national levels.

| For NAWA and national internationalisation-support agencies:

11 Continue funding research and pilot activities on implementation of the Joint European Degree Label and the wider Joint European Degree agenda in Polish universities participating in European Universities alliances, with particular attention to transferring the experience gained through this project to other Polish universities belonging to European Universities consortia.

12 Support the development of national legal-accreditation capacity to facilitate reconciling Polish legal requirements with those of foreign partners when establishing joint and double degree programmes, e.g. through interpretive guidelines or a dedicated contact point for universities.

7.3 Future research and concluding remarks

Based on the limitations identified and the questions that remain open, the following directions for future research are recommended:

- 1 A longitudinal study** tracking how ECIU universities' decisions to apply for the Label evolve as the Operational Guide becomes more widely disseminated and as experience accumulates among universities that have already received the Label (such as those within EU-CONEXUS or CHARM-EU).
- 2 In-depth case studies** at the level of individual programmes that have obtained or are applying for the Label, enabling analysis of the actual implementation process and the real (rather than merely declared) administrative burden involved.
- 3 A cross-alliance comparative study**, covering other European Universities alliances, to establish whether the patterns identified within ECIU (the joint-degree/micro-credentials tension, the communication gap, the inclusive-mobility barrier) are universal or specific to ECIU's educational model.
- 4 A study of the student perspective** – this study focused on the perspective of academic and administrative staff; it is recommended that this be complemented by research into the preferences, barriers and motivations of students actually or potentially participating in joint and double degree programmes and the Label.
- 5 A cost-benefit analysis** of the administrative and financial implementation of the Label at the level of a single programme, enabling an estimate of the real return on institutional investment in obtaining the Label.

The study confirms that the ECIU Alliance possesses a solid foundation [of experience in international educational cooperation that can support further engagement with the Joint European Degree agenda by interested member universities. At the same time, the findings clearly indicate that realising this potential fully requires not further strategic declarations, but concrete investment in administrative capacity, internal communication, and inclusive programme design.

Future engagement with the Joint European Degree Label and the wider Joint European Degree agenda across interested ECIU member universities will depend as much on decisions taken at European level as on the capacity of individual member universities to translate general support for the idea of European educational integration into concrete operational action.

"It addresses only a few students and it's high work (...)"

"European Degree is interesting, but unclear, especially for a non-EU country."

"I think it's a lot of work, but I think it's worth work."

"it's just joint degree 2.0 without really solving the problems we have already with the existing ones."

"[The students] look for something more flexible, and double degree is not flexible."

"Continuing what we started and going for micro-credentials, flexible learning pathways, challenge-based learning is something we can combine with the [joint] European degree."

"I don't strongly identify with a 'European' label. It doesn't add much value for me."

"If the Label helps attract talent, it could be useful. But the impact is uncertain."

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