

Joint degrees in the context of the Bologna Process

Preamble

ESIB-The National Unions of Students in Europe has existed since 1982 to promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level, and towards all relevant organisations and institutions. ESIB currently has 49 member organisations from 36 countries.

Introduction

Within the Bologna Process there has been the call for the establishment of recognised joint degrees to promote the European Dimension in Higher Education and graduate employability (1).

Joint study programmes could provide an instrument for giving students the chance to gain academic and cultural experience abroad and Higher Education Institutions an opportunity to cooperate.

Through this policy paper ESIB sets out the initial opinions of students' on the development of joint degrees programmes.

Given that this is a fairly new area it is necessary that ESIB is clear on the definitions used:

A joint degree is one degree given by two or more higher education institutions together, for one study programme jointly developed and implemented by all participating higher education institutions.

A double degree is two or more degrees given by two or more higher education institutions for the same study programme, in one way or another separately developed by and implemented in every participating higher education institution.

A twinning programme is a collaborative arrangement leading to a joint or a double degree. In order for a clear and productive discussion to take place, it is essential to be clear about the subtle difference between joint and double degrees.

Strengthening Co-operation between HEIs in Europe

The institutions should within the legal framework of their autonomy decide how to co-operate. The institutions must be free to choose the partner institution(s), the organisation(s) and the content of the courses. As much variety as possible should occur in this area, thus allowing a wide range of choice and diversity for the students and stimulate innovation in curriculum and pedagogical methods.

According to ESIB a joint degree should require a minimum of two higher education institutions from at least two European countries. In the long term it should be envisaged that Institutions from outside Europe also participate. In this way the importance of joint degrees can become

much wider than just a contribution to the development of the European higher education area.

Joint degrees will through the exchange of students, academics, didactical methods and course development, play a major cultural, scientific and developmental role, which will assist the enhancement of the international community.

Stimulating students and teachers mobility

According to ESIB a major function of joint degrees should be to stimulate student and teacher mobility. For students joint degrees will comprise of a period of study time in at least two European countries, therefore encouraging physical mobility. At least one academic year or its equivalent in ECTS credit points should take place in a European country other than the students' country of study. Special attention has to be paid to students who cannot benefit from physical mobility for reasons extending beyond the financial costs involved. This would require the provision of resources for students from various backgrounds (parents, adult students, students with disabilities, etc.). Therefore alternative solutions for participating in joint degree programmes have to be considered, e.g. e-learning, distance education. That students should have the right to choose when their study period abroad should take place is a crucial element of any joint degree programme.

In addition to achieving student mobility it is also important to improve staff mobility when developing joint degrees. Mobility of both teaching and researching staff must be an integral part of each programme. Such experiences will be a fundamental in fostering new insights and thus improvements in their scientific research and didactical methodologies.

Developing curricula and content in European HE programmes

Joint Degrees should not be limited to certain subjects or study programme. The studies leading to a Joint Degree should be formed around a well-structured programme, which allows the selection of a number of course units by the student. ESIB maintains that both multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary are one of the underlying characteristics of joint degree programmes.

However, ESIB stresses that the establishment of joint degree programmes must not lead to a decrease in variety of the offered courses in the institutions.

Academic staff and students should work out the curriculum of joint degrees in co-operation and consultation and form joint commissions, which are responsible for the implementation of all aspects of the programmes. The participation of students in all decisions related to joint degrees must be assured.

Joint degrees should also urge students to learn at least one foreign language. The home institution should provide comprehensive language courses in the respective languages of the joint degree programmes.

Quality assurance of joint degree programmes

All the courses offered through joint degrees programmes should be accredited and quality must be assured. The current lack of comparability between quality assurance and accreditation systems of different countries should not become an obstacle for establishing joint degree programmes. Quality assurance and accreditation agencies should be encouraged to co-operate in order to find alternative methods which solve the difficulties leading to the full academic and professional recognition of the qualifications.

Social and financial aspects

An increase of teaching and learning resources is necessary for the effective realisation of joint degrees. Sufficient funding is essential to promote further developments in the area of joint degree programmes. The governments must bear the bulk of the costs of joint degree programmes with additional money, thus avoiding restrictions on existing learning structures or passing on the responsibility of financing the programmes to the Higher Education Institutions.

Joint degree programmes must be free of tuition fees, as equality of access is a right, which must be guaranteed to all students. Students and academic staff must keep their social benefits while abroad. Both the sending and the receiving country have to take further measures to ensure equal possibilities and treatment of students and the academic staff. It is vital that both students and academic staff have the adequate financial and social supports.

A joint degree should provide for an automatic right of residency (2) in the awarding countries not only during their study period. It is however vital that efforts are taken to avoid a raise in brain-drain (3).

Conclusion

ESIB considers joint degrees as a good method of obtaining qualifications however it should not become predominate over, other existing or future methods of obtaining qualification. The establishment of joint degree programmes must be enshrined in a legal framework which defines the structural elements and secures a social support system which ensures physical mobility of students and academic staff.

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1 "Towards the European Higher Education Area" Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19th 2001

2 The right of residency implies the right to stay and work in a country

3 See ESIB document on brain-drain