

HOW TO IMPROVE THE RECOGNITION OF JOINT DEGREES?

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Joint degrees are awarded on the basis of completion of a study program established and provided jointly by two or more higher education institutions, normally located in different countries. They therefore normally require students to take a part of their degree abroad and are a potentially important instrument for increasing academic mobility and internationalizing higher education in Europe, which are among the key goals of the Bologna Process. A recent study by one of the authors, Andrejs Rauhvargers, undertaken for the European University Association (EUA), considers this increasingly important element of higher education that, however, is hampered by inadequate recognition across borders. Fair and transparent recognition of qualifications is another key goal and a precondition for success of the Bologna Process. The present article explores recognition problems related to joint degrees and focuses on how such problems could be solved.

INTRODUCTION

Joint degrees, resulting from cooperation among several HEIs located in different countries, have a considerable potential to play an important role in helping establish the European Higher Education Area, as was underlined by the Prague Higher Education Summit:

In order to further strengthen the important European dimensions of higher education and graduate employability Ministers called upon the higher education sector to increase the development of modules, courses and curricula at all levels with "European" content, orientation or organisation. This concerns particularly modules, courses and degree curricula offered in partnership by institutions from different countries and leading to a recognized joint degree².

An important follow-up measure to this call is the Joint Masters' project³ launched in the autumn of 2002 by the by the European University Association and financed by the European Commission. Eleven joint degree networks at master level have been selected for this project, initially involving 73 European universities (but this number has already grown throughout implementation phase). While the Joint Masters' project by itself is intended as a support to further development of the European Higher Education Area, its results will also contribute to the conceptual development of a much bigger action - the Erasmus World ("Erasmus Mundus") programme⁴ proposed for the years 2004-2008. The programme foresees the creation of around 90 inter-university networks to provide 250 joint Masters Courses to be further offered also to students from other parts of the world, thus stimulating the attractiveness of

European higher education and strengthening the external dimension of the Bologna process.

Within the launching phase of the EUA Joint master's project, joint degrees have been the subject of a major study⁵. The study showed that development of joint degrees is relevant to virtually all the goals of Bologna process and will boost the development of joint quality assurance, recognition, and the transparency and convergence of higher education systems throughout Europe, as well as student and staff mobility, graduate employability, the European dimension of studies and the attractiveness of European education all round.

However, this role of joint degrees can only be fulfilled if they are given sufficient attention within the national higher education systems and higher education legislation in particular; and adequate recognition across borders. The present article draws on this study and further developments but focuses specifically on problems with regard to the recognition of joint degrees and suggests possible solutions.

Joint degrees are most commonly issued as a result of cooperation between higher education institutions located in different countries and issuing their degrees within different higher education systems, but joint degrees may in principle also be issued by higher education institutions located in the same country and issuing degrees within the same higher education system. With appropriate adjustments, the solutions suggested in this article may equally well be applied to such cases.

WHAT IS A JOINT DEGREE?

It would be tempting to say that a joint degree is like summer: we cannot define it precisely, but we know it when we see it. In methodological terms, however, this is not a satisfactory solution. Therefore, even though there is no common definition in use today, we have to identify at least the main characteristics of joint degrees.

Firstly, it may be worth underlining that we see "joint degree" as a generic term that may encompass a several kinds of degrees issued in cooperation. In line with the EUA study, we consider that joint degrees can be said to have all or some of the following characteristics:

- the programs are developed and/or approved jointly by several institutions;
- the programs meet the appropriate national quality standards;
- students from each participating institution physically take part in the study program at other institutions (but they do not necessarily study at *all* cooperating institutions);
- students' stay at the participating institutions constitute a substantial part of the program;
- periods of study and examinations passed at the partner institutions are recognized fully and automatically;
- the partner institutions work out the curriculum jointly and cooperate on admission and examinations. In addition, staff of participating institutions

could be encouraged to teach at other institutions contributing to the joint degree;

- often, there is a formal agreement between the institutions providing the different components of the degree;
- after completing the full program, students either obtain the national degree of each participating institution or a degree (usually an unofficial “certificate” or “diploma”) awarded jointly by the partner institutions⁶.

We should again underline that not all joint degrees will have all of these characteristics, but all should have some of them. The main kinds of joint degrees may be illustrated by a number of examples, which include very different levels of actual cooperation in curriculum development and mobility of staff and students. Thus, joint doctoral degrees may range from joint supervision of theses by professors from different countries to actual joint doctoral programs where parts of the research toward the doctoral degree are carried out at different universities in different countries.

At first and second degree level, there are examples of different approaches to the cooperation: at one end of the spectrum there are (virtual) universities established in cooperation between two or more countries with a view to offering joint curricula leading to joint degrees, such as the Transnational University of Limburg between the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Netherlands, the Öresund University between Sweden and Denmark and the Interuniversity Europe Centre established in Bulgaria and Romania with the assistance of Germany. Double degrees exist e.g. between French and German as well as French and Italian institutions and are being established between institutions in Finland and Germany. The above partnerships normally involve students’ stay at all partner institutions. At the other end of the spectrum, we find several broader joint degree consortia consisting of up to 20-30 institutions. In these partnerships, while the curriculum is jointly developed and approved by all partners, students usually stay at two or sometimes more, but not in all partner institutions. These partnerships usually lead either to unofficial joint degree certificate on top of a national qualification (e.g. CEMS- Community of European Management Schools and a joint degree consortium in Construction Engineering) or a double degree (e.g. CIDD - International Consortium of Double Degrees and TIME – Top Industrial Managers for Europe).

A more precise definition of joint degree remains to be formulated. Still, while the examples of the existing partnerships demonstrate very different level of cooperation between the partner universities, and while in some cases the real student mobility may be partly replaced by virtual mobility, a line should be clearly drawn between a joint degree and just a franchised foreign qualification offered involving no student mobility and no actual cooperation in curriculum development - franchising does not have that potential to move forward the development of European Higher Education Space.

RECOGNITION PROBLEMS OF JOINT DEGREES

The EUA joint degrees survey indicated difficulties in recognition of joint degrees – both nationally and internationally. Respondents mentioned various kinds of difficulties as soon as a joint degree was not awarded as a single national

qualification. The examples push in the same direction – recognition problems of joint degrees are caused by the fact that they do not formally belong to any – or any single – national education system, although it is a phenomenon of a different nature than transnational education. It should also be admitted that because of this reason in a strict legal sense joint degrees are not covered by today's main international instrument for academic recognition - the Lisbon Recognition Convention. It may be worth emphasizing that even when all the components of a degree belong to a national system, the degree itself may not, as it will consist of components from two or more systems.

To fully appreciate the recognition problems of joint degrees, it is useful to bear in mind that recognition of joint degrees may concern four different situations:

- a) recognition of the joint degree in a country one of whose institutions has provided a part of the study program giving rise to the qualification;
- b) recognition in a country one of whose institutions participates in the consortium having issued the degree, but this institution has not provided any part of the degree in question, i.e. the applicant has studied at other institutions participating in the consortium;
- c) recognition in a third country, i.e. a country that has not in any way been involved in the study program and/or consortium granting the qualification;
- d) recognition of a degree, in any country, all or a part of which has not been subject to transparent quality assurance.

The new joint degrees activities consider the recognition problems: recognition among the network partners is a condition for the EUA Joint masters project, but the Erasmus World proposal explicitly mentions “built-in mechanisms for the recognition of periods of study undertaken in partner institutions in accordance with the European Credit Transfer System” and “awarding of double or multiple recognised or accredited degrees from the participating institutions”. At the same time it should be noted that while the „built-in mechanisms” will fully ensure recognition among the consortium partners and will also stimulate recognition outside the consortium, there is no guarantee that the resulting joint degree will itself be recognized outside of the consortium and especially in a wider international context.

In fact, the EUA study referred to above indicates that in current practice, it often seems more difficult to obtain recognition of a joint degree than of a “pure” foreign national degree. This is unjustified in view of the overall policy goal of stimulating international and inter-institutional cooperation and academic mobility.

It is also unjustified if we look more closely at the three situations described schematically above. Certainly, in situations (a) and (b) described above, recognition of a joint degree should be easier than recognition of a “pure” foreign qualification since in a joint degree, the study program leading to the degree has been elaborated jointly by one or more institutions belonging to the education system of the country in which recognition is sought and one or more foreign institutions, provided the appropriate quality requirements have been met (see (d)). A recognized institution in the country in which recognition is sought will therefore already have assessed the profile, level and quality of the foreign components of the joint degree, and it would

seem paradoxical if this assessment were not to be accepted by (other) competent recognition authorities in the country in which recognition is sought. While this assessment is not binding on competent recognition authorities, it should facilitate their task if they have faith in the institutions making up their own education system.

If recognition of a joint degree is sought in a third country (situation (c)), it is at least difficult to see why recognition of the joint degree should be more difficult than the recognition of a national qualification from any of the countries whose institutions have contributed to the joint degree.

It would therefore seem reasonable that the only justifiably difficult situation would arise if significant parts of a joint degree were delivered by an institution or higher education program that does not belong to a national education system and/or that has not been the subject of transparent quality assessment (d). The answer to this problem should not be automatic non-recognition, but the assessment of such a qualification would call for a more thorough look at the quality of the qualification, and non-recognition would be a possible conclusion. Besides, there are limits to the time and resources recognition bodies can devote to the assessment of a single request for recognition.

MEASURES TO FACILITATE AWARD AND RECOGNITION OF JOINT DEGREES

Amending international legislation

The present article seeks to explore how fair recognition can be given for this kind of qualification that has such a considerable potential, but that is in a strict legal sense not covered by today's main international instrument for academic recognition - the Lisbon Recognition Convention

Traditionally, higher education qualifications have been national; i.e. they have been considered a part of a national higher education system⁷. This has normally been taken as a guarantee for the quality of the qualification, even though systematic and transparent quality assessment of higher education institutions and programs is a much more recent phenomenon. It may well be argued that the traditional form of "quality assurance" has been through public budgets, in that institutions that either were directly run by public authorities or received substantial support from public funds were assumed to be of high quality.

As late as 1997, when the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region⁸ was adopted, qualifications were overwhelmingly a part of national education systems, and the issue of quality assurance could be addressed only circumspectly and with some difficulty, in that not all potential States party to the Convention accepted the concept of a formalized quality assurance system. Therefore, the Convention introduced the concept of recognition of qualifications belonging to the education system of one of the parties.

The assertion that most higher education qualifications are national still holds true, but not in the same overwhelming way as only six years ago^a.

For one, the number of qualifications issued under transnational education arrangements has increased dramatically and for the past three or four years, this has been a major issue in higher education policies. This development has underlined the need for transparent quality assessment, as the issue is not so much who provides the study program or who “owns the means of education”, to paraphrase a now outmoded ideology, as what is the quality of the education offered and how can we know what the qualification is worth. The bottom line is whether the quality meets certain standards set by the appropriate authorities. These challenges have been addressed through the UNESCO/Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education, adopted as a subsidiary text to the Convention in 2001⁹, and two major studies¹⁰.

While qualifications arising from transnational arrangements often fully stand outside national qualifications systems, in the case of joint degrees each component most often belongs to a national system and it is the combination of these elements that make competent recognition authorities (and others) consider joint degrees either as belonging to more than one national system or not fully belonging to any single national system. A solution for recognition of joint degrees can therefore be adopting of a new subsidiary text to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, specifically addressing the joint degrees and thus in practice extending the scope of Lisbon Convention also to joint degrees.

Quality assurance and institutional recognition

Only six years after the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition convention, the discussion has moved forward - it no longer concerns whether or not a quality assurance system is necessary, but what such a system should look like.

Transparent quality assessment is of key importance of if the European Higher Education Area is to be come an operational reality by 2010. It should, in fact, be in the interest of both serious institutions and students, as well as of education authorities, that all parts of joint degree programs be quality assessed.

The close link between quality assurance and recognition was underlined by the Prague Higher Education Summit, where the Ministers of the Bologna Process in their communiqué

called upon the universities and other higher education institutions, national agencies and the European Network of

^a Here, it may be helpful to keep in mind that the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which is the main international legal text concerning the recognition of qualifications as well as one of the key standards for the Bologna Process, has a double function. In legal terms, it is a treaty between states, and as such it is valid as a legal standard for the recognition of qualifications belonging to the higher education systems of the parties to the Convention as well as the qualifications covered by its subsidiary texts. In a broader sense, the Convention also serves as a guide to good practice, and in this sense, its provisions may, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied to all higher education qualifications, regardless of their origin. In this sense, the Lisbon Recognition Convention is in fact used as a standard well beyond its strictly legal function.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in cooperation with corresponding bodies from countries which are not members of ENQA, to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference and to disseminate best practice.

In our view, it is of considerable importance for the recognition of a joint degree to know if all its components have been quality assessed, whether through an assessment of the specific program or through an assessment of the institution offering the program. Where a part of the study program giving rise to a joint degree has not been the subject of quality assessment, or considered as belonging to the education system of one or more Parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, this may be a valid reason not to recognize the degree. In such cases, recognition authorities should, however, consider whether partial recognition may be granted, in keeping with the provisions of the Recommendation on Criteria and procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications¹¹.

Where the studies for the joint degree have actually taken place in a limited number of institutions, but the joint degree is awarded on the basis of a curriculum developed by a larger group or consortium consisting of a number of higher education institutions, it seems right to require that all the consortium members are recognized institutions.

Legislation

Laws exist to protect citizens and make life easier for them, but this function is not always obvious¹². Rather than facilitate reasonable solutions, legislation may prevent them, and this is unfortunately the case in many countries with regard to joint degrees. For example, it is still legally difficult in many countries to issue one single qualification in the name of several institutions, especially when at least one of these institutions is foreign. It is easy to see why it may be more difficult from an administrative point of view to grant such degrees, but it is very difficult to see why, in an age of international cooperation, easy communication and widespread information, it should be impossible or even illegal to do so. The perhaps underlying but unstated concern about the authenticity and quality of the qualification is legitimate, but the concern can be met through cooperation between quality assurance agencies and competent recognition authorities.

Another example is that it is not uncommon for higher education institutions to have rules requiring that at least one half of the credits toward any given degree be taken at the institution in question for the degree to be issued by this institution. If a student seeks a joint degree from two or more institutions practicing this rule, the results are predictable.

This is an obvious case where rules and regulations prevent a laudable initiative, but legislation may also impede fair recognition in less obvious ways. Even when national legislation does not specifically prevent joint degrees from being established or recognized, it may at least indirectly prevent joint degrees from being recognized. An absence of legal provision positively recognizing the concept of joint degrees may in itself constitute an impediment to the recognition of such qualifications.

We therefore believe it is urgent that countries participating in the Bologna Process – or aspiring to do so – review their national legislation with a view to facilitating the

setting up of study programs leading to joint degrees, the establishment of proper arrangements for relevant quality assurance and the recognition of such degrees¹³. Any review of national legislation should consider positive provision for the recognition of joint degrees rather than just abolishing any explicit impediments to such recognition.

Information

We live in an information society, but this is not to say we have the information we actually need. Information on the recognition of qualifications is one of the key challenges facing those working with the recognition of qualifications. As identified by the conference on Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process, organized in Lisbon on April 11 – 12 2002, by the Council of Europe and the Portuguese authorities, the problem is not one of a lack of information, but rather of a lack of pertinent and focused information¹⁴.

The Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer System are important information instruments that help facilitate the recognition of qualifications. In the case of joint degrees, it is particularly important that a Diploma Supplement be issued with the degree that would clearly indicate the joint character of the curriculum and describe the various components of the degrees in relation to the education systems within which they have been earned.

In order to stimulate information provision on particular joint degrees at international level, the institutions providing joint degrees should be encouraged to inform the competent recognition authorities of programs giving rise to such degrees.

How fragmented?

So far, there is no evidence of cases where the joint degree would have been given on the basis of many short periods of study at a large number of institutions. Rather, in the case of large joint degree consortia, it is the joint program that has been jointly elaborated and approved by a dozen or more institutions, but students actually spend study periods at a limited number of consortium partners – e.g. two or three institutions. However, there is at least a theoretical problem in that a qualification could be awarded after studies of relatively short periods at a greater number of institutions. In this case, we believe that attention has to be paid to the integrity of the program, in the same way that “pure” national degrees would normally have requirements not only concerning workload¹⁵, but also the profile and level of a qualification. Even if one spends three or four years as a full time student following introductory courses in a wide variety of academic disciplines, this is unlikely to lead to a first degree. Likewise, while we would hesitate to stipulate a maximum number of institutions that may provide courses for a joint degree, an excessive fragmentation could be a valid reason not to recognize this degree fully, if this means the qualification is not sufficiently coherent.

CONCLUSION

Joint degrees are potentially useful instruments to help further the internationalization of European higher education and in particular to help make the European Higher Education Area a reality. However, joint degrees can only be truly useful if they are

adequately recognized, and in this article we have sought to point to some solutions to recognition problems. These should follow the general principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and should also emphasize the link between the recognition of qualifications and the quality assessment of higher education programs and institutions. In addition, countries should review their legislation to remove any direct or indirect legal obstacles to the establishment and recognition of joint degrees, and the widespread use of the Diploma Supplement and the ECTS will help facilitate such recognition.

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² Prague Communiqué, adopted by the Ministers of the Bologna Process on May 19, 2001.

³ See details at the website of the European University Association, <http://www.unige.ch/eua>

⁴ See http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/world/index_en.html for more information on Erasmus World proposal.

⁵ See Andrejs Rauhvargers, "Joint Degree Study" in Christian Tauch and Andrejs Rauhvargers: *Survey on Master Degrees and Joint Degrees in Europe* (Bruxelles 2002: European University Association).

⁶ Adapted from Andrejs Rauhvargers, op. cit., p. 29

⁷ Or as a part of one of several systems, in the case of countries with a federal system, such as Belgium.

⁸ At the time of writing, 30 States had ratified and a further 14 signed this Convention. A list of ratifications and signatures may be found at <http://conventions.coe.int> by searching for ETS 165.

⁹ In Article X.2.5, the Convention foresees that the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention Committee may adopt subsidiary texts to the Convention. So far, three such texts have been adopted:

- (i) a Recommendation on International Access Qualifications (1999);
- (ii) a Recommendation on Criteria and procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (2001);
- (iii) a Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (2001).

¹⁰ The first, encompassing the countries of the European Economic Area, was published in 2001, see Stephen Adam: *Transnational Education Project: Reports and Recommendations* (Bruxelles 2001: Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences (now EUA)). A second study, focusing on countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well as Cyprus and Malta, is under way.

¹¹ Cf. paragraph 8 of this Recommendation, adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee at its second meeting (Rīga, 6 June 2001).

¹² For more on this point, see Sjur Bergan: "A Tale of Two Cultures in Higher Education Policies: the Rule of Law or an Excess of Legalism?" (forthcoming [[under review for possible publication in the *Journal of Studies in International Education*](#)])

¹³ A call for a review of national legislation in this sense was made by the 2002 plenary session of the CD-ESR

¹⁴ See Sjur Bergan (ed.): *Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process* (Strasbourg, to appear in 2003: Council of Europe Publishing), in particular the articles by Stephen Adam and Chantal Kaufmann and the report by the General Rapporteur, Lewis Purser.

¹⁵ Often expressed as a number of credits.