



COIMBRA GROUP STATEMENT

WHY WE NEED THE EUROPEAN DEGREE NOW

Shaping the future of European higher education

Brussels, 3rd February 2025

Realizing the format of European Degree (ED) will be a **cornerstone of Europe's further integration**, especially in today's polycrises context where the European Union (EU)'s unity, its values and cooperation are our strongest assets. The times call for an ambitious vision for higher education, the bedrock of social cohesion, progress, innovation and competitiveness.

Through their pivotal international role, Universities create knowledge, education and innovation. They are driving forces for cooperation on all levels. In his report to the European Council, Enrico Letta recommended the adoption of the European Degree for "*realising the fifth freedom*". A ED is more than a qualification or a label. It is crucial for furthering the interconnectedness and inclusiveness of the educational landscape across Europe.

Coimbra Group (CG) is therefore calling for rapid progress in the enactment of the European Degree, on a voluntary basis, in full compliance with the subsidiarity principle and competence of the EU27 Member States and by creating flexible and enabling structures which guarantee academic freedom.

We call on all actors to focus on the benefits and opportunities, rather than dwelling on challenges. **Let's move forward and create the future by experimenting! Why do we need the European Degree?**

There is a breadth of **evidence and analysis available**. **Let's build on it: the momentum is now!** Wasting more time would dilute the interest.

Existing programmes such as the **Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (EMJM)**, the **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Doctoral Networks**, the **Erasmus+ pilot projects** – such as ED-AFFICHE & ED-Lab, to which CG contributed - and the **European Universities Initiative**, have demonstrated that **ED-like frameworks can work effectively**, benefiting students, higher education institutions, public and private employers, and society at large through building up, among others, future-proof competencies by interlinking research and education. .

As champions of these different initiatives, CG Universities have developed extensive experience and consolidated relevant knowledge in this area. Our network **remains committed to further support and offer expertise to EU and national policy makers for collectively making the ED a reality.**



Why do we need the European Degree?

- **European Higher Education attractiveness**
 - The ED is a vector to **enhance the global attractiveness** of European higher education and visibility and reputation of its Universities both in research and education
 - CG welcomes the much-needed opportunity offered by the ED to **accelerate the speed of implementation of the Bologna Process tools**.
 - The ED reinforces the ability of **Universities as central hubs to attract and retain talents**.
 - The ED is a needed tool to enrich and further internationalisation of Universities.
- **Student-centred Benefits**
 - The ED clearly provides students with **new educational opportunities** and **future-proof skills** much awaited in an always-changing labour market.
 - CG emphasises the important role the ED has in **fostering multilingualism** across Europe and enhancing the intercultural and academic experience of students.
 - It is crucial that **the design of the ED prioritizes students' needs and benefits**. Hence, we call on all institutions and member states to work along with students to develop the ED at their level.
 - The ED **supports student mobility while ensuring they feel safe**, with no loss of credits or time. This is an essential element in a world of increasing uncertainty - particularly for the youngest generations.
- **A driver for cultural change in academia**
 - CG welcomes the ED as **a driver for more innovative and more inter- and multi-disciplinary higher education curricula**, therefore contributing to the Union of Skills agenda. This includes all disciplines and especially the social sciences and the humanities. It will also address transversal themes and technologies, such as the digital transformation or AI.
 - The ED has the **potential to serve as leverage for changes of paradigms** in teaching and learning among higher education staff, enhancing the overall quality of education. This potential lies in its ability to encourage academic staff to adopt more innovative



approaches. However, this impact is not necessarily tied to changes in regulations at any level, and the distinction should be made clearer.

- CG truly believes that there is potential for **maximizing the positive impact of the ED on the entire academic community**, encouraging widespread engagement.

- **A clear added value compared to existing joint programmes**
 - CG is of the view that there is a **huge benefit to be gained from the security provided by the ED** in comparison with the standard project cycle of current supporting schemes for joint programmes (Erasmus Mundus, MSCA...).
 - Embedded in a long-term perspective, the curricula awarded with the ED have a greater potential than existing programmes to become **effective enablers of systemic change in higher education**.
 - CG acknowledges that the ED can help achieve more efficient synergies between education, research and innovation, by **promoting research-based curricula**.

Turning the idea of the ED into a widespread reality

- **Future EU Policy Lab on the ED**
 - CG is **ready to actively engage with the EU Policy Lab** by nominating experts, contributing to the drafting of the implementation guidelines for the ED, and participating in other activities as appropriate.
 - CG recommends that the European Commission adopts an **inclusive approach in the composition of the future EU Policy Lab on the ED**, by involving higher education institutions, university networks, European University Alliances, students, national authorities, quality assurance agencies, ENIC-NARIC centres and employers alike.

- **Building Trust and Collective Efforts**
 - CG acknowledges the key role of multi-stakeholder meetings such as the workshop organised by the University of Pavia on 21 January 2025. It is indeed **essential to foster reciprocal trust between higher education institutions and national authorities**, thus helping national communities and systems adapt to the ED framework ; hence we recommend that all countries participating in the Erasmus+ programme organise national consultations.



- CG is **willing to take part in the collective efforts to address the diversity of higher education systems across Europe**, including fees, academic calendars, accreditation procedures and any other relevant issues.
- CG considers it **is important that the introduction of the ED fully respects the subsidiarity principle and the competence of the EU27 member states**. The ED should be awarded **on a voluntary basis**.
- **Inclusivity Across Europe and Beyond**
 - CG believes that the **European University Alliances provide a useful framework to help achieve the ED**. We believe the ED can be **an important step to the institutionalization of the EU Alliances** as it requires shared resources that can only be used at their full potential with a legal status.
 - CG is putting emphasize on seeing **close collaboration between Alliances on the ED** as an essential step for success.
 - CG stresses the importance of **engaging with UK and Swiss higher education institutions** when developing the ED: extending a collaborative hand, rather than adopting a protectionist stance, is key.
 - CG welcomes the possible **participation of non-European higher education institutions in the ED framework** as a mean to foster global cooperation. This could be use as a leverage to start discussion on opening the EU Alliances non-European higher education institutions as partners.

Challenges and Limitations

- **ED vs ED label**
 - CG **urges Member States to clarify their positions on the timeline related to the adoption of the European Degree**.
 - Should a two-step approach be considered, **the implementation of the ED label should accelerate the full development of the ED** as a new type of qualification, but in no way cause delay or detriment it.
 - Among others, **the same criteria should be used** for the award of the ED label and the award of the ED.



- **Institutional and Legislative Processes**

- CG recommends renewed efforts by Member States to integrate European approaches into national legislations and to remove institutional barriers that hinder implementation. **The implementation of the ED criteria** - as proposed by the Commission and strengthened by the 2023-2024 pilot projects - **should build upon the experience of the implementation of the European Approach in order to have an efficient approach.**
- CG acknowledges that **higher education institutions must look at themselves** and work internally on removing any institutional cultural & administrative barriers to the full implementation of the ED.
- CG raises awareness on how crucial it is to **invest in staff training** to support cultural change, intercultural awareness, and effective implementation. **Recognizing and rewarding staff efforts** in these areas in the development of their careers is equally important.

- **Financial and Technological Investment**

- CG considers that **adequate funding is critical to the success of the ED.** European and national funding authorities must allocate sufficient resources from the beginning to prevent the initiative from failing. The current budget outlined in the 2025 working plan is clearly insufficient, even though sending a good message to the community.
- CG stresses that everything should be done to **prevent that the ED creates an elite class of students.** We find it highly important to be aware of the costs associated with mobility. This must be addressed by public authorities.
- CG highlights the importance of **investing in technological resources and interoperability** as key to support the future implementation of the ED in order to ease the collaboration between higher education institutions.

- **Communication**

- CG spotlights the needed efforts to **start now raising awareness in the public and private sectors about the value of the ED for employers.** Without this, early cohorts of graduates of ED programmes may face challenges in having their qualifications recognized on the labour market.





The European Degree represents a **renewal in the higher education sector**—a renewal of discussions, processes, ambition, and of the collective vision of a united Europe. By focusing on its benefits, addressing challenges collaboratively, and ensuring adequate support, we can make the European Degree a **transformative initiative for students, Universities and the broader academic community**.

— Coimbra Group Executive Board —

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