

D4.5. – Report on the pilot issuing of a joint European degree label certificate following the compliancy exercise

Conclusions and general recommendations

This section provides conclusions and general recommendations related to the added value of the label initiative, to a potential future labelling procedure and to the design of the joint European degree label certificate as per EDLab's viewpoint, which in turn is based on the results of the activities done in project context.

Added value of the joint European degree label

EDLab considers the joint European degree label as **a marker for excellence in European jointness**. The label should be distinctive, easily recognizable and with reputational value. The label should act as an incentive for transformation and enhancement of transnational joint study programmes, higher education institutions, alliances, and regional and national systems. Its overall goal should be **systemic change**. As such, EDLab recommends to formulate the label criteria in a restrictive manner and to award the label only to those joint programmes that actually guarantee excellence in European jointness, while maintaining respect for the positive diversity in individual joint programmes. The joint European degree label is **open to all joint programmes** that meet the common European criteria, under whichever umbrella or type of higher education institution alliances they may be set up.

EDLab, as the other pilot projects, was set up to investigate the potential and feasibility of a joint European degree **label** and considers it **as a necessary intermediate step** towards the implementation of a European degree, given the current variety in implementation levels of the related Bologna instruments across the different higher education systems, thereby creating a level playing field. The implementation of the label initiative in itself does not presuppose regulatory changes at national / regional level. Yet, by designing the label as an attractive marker for excellence in European jointness, benefitting from support through a dedicated promotion campaign, it can provide an incentive towards the implementation of the label criteria. In this way, a transformation towards strengthened transnational cooperation and harmonization is maintained while at the same time giving Member States the space to progress at their own pace. Such incentive will be all the more stronger if joint programmes were to benefit from some form of financial support for their (re-)design and implementation according to the label criteria, alongside the access to sufficient financial support for the mobility of students and staff that participate in the resulting joint study programmes.

Future labelling procedure and evaluation of compliance

EDLab recommends to assign the label awarding procedure to **EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies**. To avoid duplication of effort, and in line with the recommendation of adding the use of the European Approach as compulsory in the label criteria (cf. D2.3.), evaluation of compliance should be **incorporated into the procedures for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes**. The procedure to apply for the label should be designed as **lightweight**, both for joint programme coordinators as well as for the evaluating body. Programmes that have already gone through the European Approach and are not due for renewal could apply for the label in a separate procedure. Programmes that are yet to go through the European Approach can start the procedure, and if they wish, also apply for the label alongside with it. It could be considered that an accreditation through the European Approach may automatically lead to the awarding of the label in case the joint programme proves to be compliant with all label criteria. The label then becomes an opt-out instead of an opt-in activity. A transparent, publically available

repository of the labelled joint programmes is to be created. It could be considered to include an overview of the reports and decisions on the awarding of the label with DEQAR, the Database of External Quality Assurance Results.

Compliance with the common European criteria may be determined at two levels. Firstly, **compliance per criterium** is to be evaluated. Depending on the criterium, compliance can be determined either on a **two-tier or a three-tier scale**. A two-tier scale refers to compliance or non-compliance. A three-tier scale refers to compliance, non-compliance or partial compliance whereby in the latter case the joint programme meets only some aspects of the criterium. In view of a **final decision** by the evaluating body on the awarding of the label to a joint programme, the final decision may be **compliance, non-compliance, or a conditional advice**. Joint programmes may receive a conditional advice on the awarding of the label in case there is a limited number of criteria that are evaluated as partially compliant or non-compliant and that evaluators consider possible to **remedy within a reasonable timeframe**. If the partial compliance is successfully remedied in due time, the joint programme is awarded the label. Joint programmes may be considered as non-compliant and thus will not be awarded the label if it was not successful in redressing the conditions for being awarded the label, or if it is judged impossible for the joint programme to remedy non-compliant or partially compliant criteria within the given timeframe.

Publicity on the awarding of the label and reference to the label in communication and dissemination activities by the labelled joint programmes may only start until a joint programme is evaluated as fully compliant with all the criteria.

Label, label logo, label certificate

The joint European degree **label** is awarded to joint programmes based on a positive evaluation of their compliance with the common European criteria. The evaluation is done by an EQAR-registered quality assurance agency, and is aligned with the European Approach procedures. Personalized joint European degree **label certificates** are issued to students who have graduated from a joint programme that has been evaluated as compliant with the common European criteria. The label certificate is issued by the labelled joint programmes, yet on a voluntary basis. Both elements are tied together by a dedicated joint European degree **label logo**.

The **label logo** is considered **indispensable** to the label initiative as it serves as the **key visual identifier** that is consistently used throughout. The label logo contributes to the branding, publicity and recognizability of the label initiative. It may be used by the labelled joint programmes in their **communication and dissemination** activities. It is to be used by the owners of the label initiative and, for example, can be added onto a dedicated **centralized webpage** that provides detailed information on the rationale of the label initiative, the award procedure and the common European criteria. The label logo may also serve either **on the label certificate** or, in future scenarios, is to be integrated **onto the joint diploma and / or corresponding diploma supplement** that is awarded by the labelled joint programmes. The link to the centralized webpage is to be included onto the label certificate or onto the joint diploma (supplement).

The **label certificate** is considered as a stand-alone, complementary certificate that is issued alongside the joint diploma. It is recommended to design a clear template for the label certificate. The template is **to reflect the transnational character of a joint programme**, emphasizing the highly integrated nature of the joint programme while at the same time remaining **adaptable to the context of the individual joint programmes**. Guidance for joint programmes on how to go about issuing such label certificate may be provided through a **guiding document** that accompanies the template. The guiding document may present

different scenarios on points of contention that may be subject to prescriptions that apply to the higher education institutions involved. It **does not presuppose nor impose a regulatory framework in its own**. This approach allows for **flexibility** to go about applicable prescriptions while at the same time **maintaining recognizability** of the label initiative through the use of a harmonized template that reflects jointness and that includes a label logo that consistently serves as the key visual identifier for the label initiative.

Issuing a **separate label certificate** poses however a number of **challenges**. First, applicable prescriptions (if any) of the involved HEIs are to be harmonized when issuing a joint label certificate hence increasing the administrative workload for the issuing parties. The label certificate in itself however is not subject to a dedicated regulatory framework, which EDLab recommends not to impose. Second, the timing of issuing the label certificate is to correspond with the timing of issuing the joint diploma as the label certificate is considered complementary to the joint diploma and holds no value without its representation. Issuing joint diplomas for transnational joint programmes still is a very technical, administrative and time-consuming task. Coordinating both timelines also facilitates the alignment of the content that is included on the label certificate with the content on the joint diploma. Disalignment may undermine the value or even the authenticity of both certificates. Fourth, the question arises on the tracability of the personalized label certificates that are issued by the labelled joint programmes. **Advantages** of issuing separate, personalized label certificates are that it may further the branding of the label initiative as it serves as tangible output thereof. Additionally, receiving a personalized label certificate may be more appreciated by its holders and may be more easily recognized and interpreted by future employers, especially if any efforts to increase the recognizability of the transnational character of the actual joint diploma were to remain fruitless.

It may be considered to step away from issuing separate label certificates for technical, administrative reasons and / or for reasons of simplicity. Alternatively, **the label logo may be included onto the joint diploma and / or single diploma supplement**, on the condition that it is accommodated for in the national / regional regulatory frameworks. This would avoid the additional administration of issuing complementary label certificates, and ensures that all relevant information is contained onto one document.

Within EDLab pilot context, the design of the label certificate is considered as an intermediary step towards a possible **model for a future 'joint European diploma'**, that may include single qualifications. The label certificate was therefore designed with the look and feel of such an 'ideal' joint European diploma. By making use of a **harmonized template**, the suggestion is made that the variety of models and combinations of diplomas that are currently still awarded within the framework of transnational joint programmes, may be overcome, if this is accommodated for in the respective regulatory contexts. Reflecting 'jointness' as well as the transnational cooperation and transnational learning outcomes of the students should be the prime aim, thereby also facilitating readability, transparency and comparability of degrees of students, institutions, credential evaluators, future employers and other stakeholders purposely furthering recognition.