

## Why a European Degree is necessary according to Dutch universities

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### Introduction

**Universities and university partnerships have fundamental impact on the innovation power of the Netherlands and Europe.** Cooperation between knowledge institutions contributes greatly to European autonomy and to strengthening competitiveness, which reduces dependence on countries outside of Europe. **The European Universities Alliances are a good example of this.** The alliances are fundamental to the flexibility and innovativeness of higher education and to successfully responding to societal challenges.

This innovativeness is anchored in the integral nature of the alliances – education, research and societal impact – combined with economies of scale. **Far-reaching cooperation between students, academics, researchers, businesses, cities, governments and civil society organisations contributes to educational quality, innovation and society at both local/regional, national and international levels.** This research-education-transfer nexus contributes to training and retaining talent for the Netherlands.

Within the alliances, higher education institutions develop structural, sustainable and systemic cooperation characterised by innovative jointly-offered curricula **based on innovation, high quality and unique positioning.** This involves a selective and limited number of programmes per alliance that are fundamental to the integral cooperation and strong positioning of the alliance.

**The European Degree is an important link in this process** and a foundation for long-term structural cooperation. The Universities of the Netherlands are therefore strongly in favour of some form of a European Degree. We **call on the Dutch government to adopt a constructive attitude and provide space for the development of this instrument.** Restricting access to a European Degree could complicate the functioning of Dutch institutions within alliances, and limit access to educational innovations and participation in top programmes for Dutch students and staff. This would result in a weaker positioning within alliances and within Europe. **A constructive attitude towards the European Degree ensures that Dutch institutions remain well-connected to the innovation power offered by the alliances, while strengthening and retaining talent for the Netherlands.**

### Opportunities

#### Competitiveness of Dutch universities, the Netherlands and the EU

In countries that are part of their European Degree study programme, students get easy -yet flexible- access to: subject-specific knowledge, teachers, other European students, infrastructures such as laboratories and pilot facilities, and cross-border societal assignments that are not always available in their home country. **In this way, they gain experiences and skills they would otherwise not have gained and also develop an international network.** This also applies to Dutch students who do part of their studies abroad. And unlike a short Erasmus+ exchange, students participating in a European Degree programme benefit from an international classroom throughout their studies. **Ultimately, well-trained students contribute to the competitiveness of the Netherlands and the EU, with both the subject-specific and transversal skills they obtain during their programme.**

The European Degree also stimulates strategic collaborations and interdisciplinarity, which benefits the quality of education at various levels, from European to Euregional. A European Degree thus contributes to the attractiveness of studying in the EU, the appeal of the EU in general, and through that, to the position of the Netherlands. **A strong European education system, supported by initiatives such as the European**

**Degree, is crucial to develop talent in sectors such as AI, green technology and digital economy.** This not only helps solve labour market shortages, but also makes Europe less dependent. Both students already living in Europe, as well as talent coming from other parts of the world are needed to increase the competitiveness of Europe and its member states.

## Harmonisation & integral cooperation

A key objective of the European Degree is that it provides a solution to challenges of quality assurance and accreditation, joint degree awarding and implementation. These aspects will make education more widely accessible and flexible. This is different from the Erasmus Mundus initiative, which uses a funding programme to finance existing joint masters programmes. While students study in different countries, the participating universities award separate degrees. The European Degree is a reform initiative proposing a joint European diploma, for both Bachelor's and Master's degrees, awarded by multiple universities in EU countries. **In doing so, the European Degree aims at deeper and broader transnational cooperation and integration of higher education in Europe.**

Currently, for some subject areas in the EU, it is almost impossible to work in a particular sector without a degree obtained in the country concerned. A European Degree in a particular field could remove such barriers. **This would create programmes of particularly high quality that can only be created by pooling the unique expertise of the universities involved. This creates a magnet effect for top talent and thus actively contributes to our competitiveness as European universities, and to the idea of a flexible, competitive labour market.** This applies in particular to STEM-related specialisations, in which shortages are already occurring. With a European Degree, Dutch universities can contribute to the EU Skills agenda.

## Balanced mobility

In a European Degree programme, students do not have to cross borders for the entire study period, but only as part of the programme they are following from their home institution. In many cases, the student starts at home and ends at home. This makes it more likely that the student will stay in the country of origin afterwards, which **prevents brain drain and encourages balanced mobility.** For the Netherlands, this means that there is a greater chance that the student who started in the Netherlands will stay in the Netherlands and contribute to the Dutch economy. **Students starting at another European university put less strain on existing capacity in the Netherlands,** as the participating universities in a European Degree share the organisational burden.

## Conditions

### Easing administrative burdens

Dutch universities, like with the already existing Joint Degrees, expect to offer only a limited number of European Degrees and mainly within the framework of the alliances of European Universities. **A European Degree will therefore only work if no additional administrative burden is created.** Streamlining the processes and accountabilities between involved institutions, their ministries and quality assurance organisations is therefore essential to make a European Degree work.

### Bologna

Therefore, it is important that **we use and simplify existing Bologna tools,** such as the *European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*, in order to avoid duplicate and/or contradictory processes. Both the Netherlands and Dutch universities support the Bologna Process. A European Degree brings us one step closer to achieving the goals from this process.

### Autonomy

And while Dutch universities see benefits in a European Degree, **the autonomy of universities must remain explicitly protected.** The issuing of degrees thus remains exclusively a task of participating universities and is safeguarded in national legislation. The introduction of a European Degree should respect the principle of subsidiarity and the competence of EU member states, and its implementation should be considered with care. **We therefore underline the principle that a European Degree should be awarded on a voluntary**

**basis by universities, within their national context and within specific study programmes.** This aligns with the advice of the *Future-proof Criteria for Innovative Education (FOCI) project* (page 29) in which the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) were an associate partner. Legal and procedural developments that can be introduced at the national level to remove barriers to developing a joint degree are welcome. What we do not want is a kind of European 'super degree' accompanied by new bureaucracy or (restrictive) preconditions. Instead, as mentioned above, already existing Bologna quality assurance mechanisms such as the European Approach should be used. This requires close cooperation and coordination with national accreditation agencies such as NVAO.

## Funding

Long-term funding is needed to realise the above. Additional resources are needed to remove legal and administrative barriers and to develop innovative forms of education. Either directly from the European Commission, or national resources to ensure that NVAO, together with the sector, can implement the necessary procedures and frameworks for a European Degree. Making optimal use of existing instruments such as the Bologna Process, and new initiatives, such as the 'Blueprint for a European Degree', is essential here. A structural investment will ensure a strong, integrated European higher education system, which will directly benefit the Netherlands.

For EU Member States, it is worth considering bringing together experiences with student and staff mobility under Erasmus+, the shaping of Erasmus Mundus programmes, and the first and second phases of the European Universities Initiative, into a future-proof European Degree approach, including funding and, where necessary, prioritisation of education that requires a European approach to provide sufficient talent.

## Next steps

The Dutch universities ask the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to take note of their wish to actively participate in shaping European Degrees. **Both within and outside the context of the European Universities Alliances, the European Degree offers opportunities.** Intensified cooperation between universities in all fields is important for the competitiveness of both the Netherlands and the EU.

**The first step towards a European Degree is to develop a 'label' as a test phase.** Working towards a full European Degree with joint accreditation is a complex political, administrative and legal process which requires time and attention. **Setting up a Policy Lab in the field of European Degree is therefore a good idea,** as well as facilitating pilots within existing university alliances.