

arQus

European University Alliance



Arqus Position Paper on the European Degree

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Arqus European University Alliance.

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1. Preamble – Arqus

The Arqus European University Alliance was one of the 17 alliances to be selected in the first call of the European University Initiative in 2019. It brings together the universities of Granada, Graz, Leipzig, Lyon 1, Maynooth, Minho, Padua, Vilnius and Wrocław, who share extensive experience in joint projects and a common profile as internationalized institutions with deep regional engagement. The principal ambition of the Alliance is to act jointly as a laboratory for institutional learning and to move forward in the design, testing and implementation of an innovative model for deep inter-university cooperation.

The 2022-32 Arqus Mission Statement established as its major goals the transformation of European higher education, research and innovation through deep cooperation and progressive integration, in pursuit of an equitable and sustainable future by together¹:

- Educating critical and socially engaged European citizens, equipped for lifelong learning, leaving no-one behind.
- Generating excellent, open, challenge-driven, innovative, and reflective knowledge.
- Acting as a committed multi-level societal and global player.
- Bringing down barriers to effective cooperation.

The Alliance is thus deeply committed to promoting joint academic offer in a variety of forms.

This position paper draws on the Arqus experience in the design, development and delivery of joint programmes, which may be summarised as follows. Arqus institutions bring together decades of experience in joint programme development and delivery at all our institutions. The first joint programme to be officially instated at an Arqus university dates back to 1989; practically all Arqus universities have been heavily involved in Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Programmes, some of them since the beginning of the programme in 2004. As an Alliance since 2019, Arqus has worked intensely on the practical development and delivery of joint programmes of all kinds: three joint programmes have been set up ex novo, two of them leading to joint Master's degrees accredited according to the European Approach, and six more are currently under development covering both EQF6 and EQF7 levels; the Alliance has also designed and delivered a large number of joint short term learning experiences in the form of MOOCs, microcredentials, summer and winter schools etc. Finally, Arqus has led a consortium of four alliances (together with Enlight, Eutopia and SEA-EU) in the EDLab pilot project, one of the six policy experimentation projects funded by the European Commission (EC) to explore the viability of the implementation of the European Degree Label.

This Arqus Position Paper on the European Degree aims to contribute to the policy debate on the European Degree and the European Degree label, at a crucial point in the debate in the light of the Higher Education Package published on 27 March, and in the light of our collective experience and experiments, the challenges encountered and our shared ambitions for the coming years.

1. <https://arqus-alliance.eu/vision-mission-and-goals/>

2. The European Degree

Arqus broadly welcomes the European Commission's publication on 27 March 2024 of its Blueprint for a European Degree, together with Draft Council Recommendations on Quality Assurance for European Higher Education and on Attractive Careers in European Higher Education, all three being important interrelated issues in need of quite urgent attention from policymakers at Member State and European level. Arqus further appreciates the openness of the debates leading to the drafting of the three documents, the timeliness of proposals contained therein, and supports the general direction taken by this roadmap and the framework it provides for future action.

In this regard, we recall the general conclusions of the EDLab project as submitted following the call for evidence launched by the Commission in early 2024, prior to the publication of the Higher Education Package:

See EDLab full report².

ADDED VALUE OF THE EUROPEAN DEGREE LABEL

European universities have aspired for many years to facilitate the setting up of truly joint programmes leading to a single joint qualification, as perhaps the most integrated form of international cooperation. The EDLab project sees the European Degree Label as an important initiative to further this ambition both within the European Universities Initiative and in the European Higher Education Area at systemic level.

The European Degree Label should be seen as a marker of excellence in European jointness. It should be distinctive, easily recognisable, with reputational value, and act as an incentive for transformation and enhancement of programmes, institutions, alliances and regional and national systems. Its overall goal should be systemic change.

As such, the criteria for the award of the Label should be restrictive and the award made only to those programmes which actually guarantee excellence in European jointness, while respecting the necessary and positive diversity in individual programmes.

The Label is seen by EDLab as a necessary intermediate step towards the implementation of a full European degree, which should be a mid- to long-term goal, with two further scenarios: (1) the implementation of a "European degree" in national legislation guaranteeing full recognition on a par with other national diplomas, potentially followed in the much longer term by (2) the implementation of a "European degree" at European level, necessitating a modification of the Treaty.

2. Report on barriers in applying the criteria in current joint programmes:

<https://www.ed-lab.eu/d2-3>

SCOPE OF LABEL APPLICATION

In principle the Label should be of application to all higher education EQF levels.

Given the different nature of EQF8, it would be appropriate to apply a slightly different set of criteria to programmes at EQF levels 6 and 7 on the one hand, and those at EQF level 8 on the other.

It would be interesting to explore how the Label could also cover EQF level 5. Similarly, the general approach for the Label should also be applicable to microcredentials and other short academic offer, although it would be advisable to draft a specific version of the criteria and a specific design of the procedures for these in order to ensure an agile and flexible approach in keeping with their nature.

CRITERIA FOR THE AWARD OF THE LABEL – GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

For clarity and ease of application, all criteria should be mandatory, avoiding confusion over the meaning and scope of optional, additional or voluntary criteria.

Criteria should be clear and transparent, with simple formulations, avoiding different expressions of modality (“preferably”, “where possible” ...) and examples.

Criteria themselves should be formulated in such a way as to avoid misinterpretation, but to this end should also be accompanied by a clear glossary of the terminology used and by extensive guidelines explaining all basic concepts and giving diverse examples of ways to comply, especially in the light of the complex multilingual and multicultural context in which they will be used.

Criteria should correspond clearly to the heading given in each case.

In general, the criteria should cover all aspects of the programmes: organization and management, learning experience, student and staff support as well as European core values on which programmes are based.

The criteria should be organized conceptually into these various areas of programme excellence.

The role of both academic and administrative staff should be explicitly recognised in the criteria, as acknowledgement both of the central role of staff for the success of joint programmes, and of the added value for staff of adding a European dimension to their professional activity.

It should also be remembered that programmes are run in institutional contexts and that not all the criteria should be understood as the responsibility of the individual programme, but rather as the explicit joint institutional responsibility of the HEIs involved.

The criteria should be related explicitly to the relevant ESG standards as well as those of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. Similarly, reference should also be made to existing EHEA tools (ECTS, Diploma Supplement, etc.), ensuring synergies and coherent implementation of those tools.

Criteria should be aligned and coherent with EU policies in general (Treaty, European Education Area, European Research Area, European Strategy for Universities, EU language policy, EU cohesion policy, environmental sustainability policies, ...).

EVALUATION OF COMPLIANCE

Evaluation of compliance should be incorporated into European Approach procedures to avoid duplication of effort, although programmes undergoing new or renewal accreditation procedures should be able to apply only for the Label evaluation. This necessarily implies that the institutions, fields or programmes should be evaluated by an EQAR-registered agency.

Depending on the criterion, compliance should be evaluated on either a two-tier (fully compliant, non-compliant) or three-tier scale (fully compliant; partially compliant; non-compliant). As part of the evaluation process, programmes with a limited number of partially compliant elements that can be remedied within a reasonable timeframe, should be given a short period of time to redress those shortcomings, following which the Label is fully awarded or not. To avoid confusion or potential damage for programme reputation or individual students' expectations, there should be no publicity on the awarding of the label until a programme is evaluated as fully compliant with all the criteria.

AWARD AND CERTIFICATION OF THE LABEL

The Label is awarded to a joint programme, which is thus entitled to use the official logo in its degree diplomas (where possible), in all programme information, marketing materials etc. The award of the label should be registered centrally in DEQAR to ensure transparency and traceability.

Especially during a transition period when it may not be possible to include the logo of the Label on diploma certificates directly, the programme may then also issue certificates to graduates indicating that they have completed a programme which has been awarded the European Degree Label. Although this certificate for graduates has no legal effect without the corresponding official diploma, its issuing should be traceable and verifiable. The EDLab project has piloted the design and delivery of these certificates.

In the future formal process, the joint programmes that have been awarded the Label should be registered as such in DEQAR, and the institution (coordinating institution or other institution as per consortium agreement) that prepares the diploma and certificate is also to register the programme as such in its internal system, linking programme, Label certificate and graduate data, in a similar way as for the diploma and diploma supplement.

FUNDING

Adequate funding should be foreseen to support joint programmes in the future and ensure equal access and opportunities. The funding should apply both to the joint programme design phase and to student support, especially but not exclusively for participation costs and physical mobility periods.

Arqus welcomes the extent to which these and other conclusions of the six policy experimentation projects and other input from the Higher Education sector have been taken into account in the three documents published as the Higher Education Package. Further to the previous position adopted within EDLab, the Alliance would now extend those considerations, many of which are directly linked to the notion of a Label, as opposed to a fully- fledged European Degree, which EDLab sees as a second step in the process.

While welcoming the ambition of the two-track roadmap presented by the European Commission whereby Member States could opt for the European Degree Label or directly for the implementation of the European Degree as a new category of degree for joint programmes in all cycles in National Qualifications Frameworks, Arqus would like to underline the potential risk of a two-tier system introducing further divergence in procedures and regulations during a, potentially long, transition period. In order to avoid this, it is imperative that Member States, together with the European Commission, establish mechanisms for the coordination of their reform processes.

Whilst the major goal must be the implementation of a truly European Degree as a qualification, the interim value of the Label in the adoption of award criteria, familiarity of employers with the concept, and the alleviation of existing concerns regarding competition with national qualifications or loss of national and institutional identity should not be dismissed.

Arqus welcomes the voluntary nature of the proposed European Degree, at institutional, regional and national level, thus safeguarding the principles of institutional autonomy, and subsidiarity.

Similarly, true to its commitment to sharing experience and seeking systemic transformation, Arqus is deeply aware that all regulatory reform must benefit the entire higher education sector, and not only those institutions participating in European University alliances.

Arqus in particular welcomes the enhancement of the common criteria proposed in Annex 2 of the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education with regard to the initial proposal contained in the policy experimentation call³.

Alongside the criteria themselves, it is essential that the way forward includes a guarantee of simplified procedures, avoiding any duplication of effort, preferably involving the full implementation in all national contexts of existing Bologna tools, such as the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of joint degrees or the European Standards and Guidelines currently under review. In this, coordination amongst quality assurance agencies across the European Union, Erasmus+ and EHEA partner countries will be essential.

3. Call ERASMUS-EDU-2022-POL-EXP

<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/erasmus-edu-2022-pol-exp-eudegree>

Arqus further welcomes the openness of the proposal to international partners, as evidenced by the need for a minimum of only two European partners for joint programmes to fulfil the criteria of the European Degree (Label). This is an essential reflection of Europe's role as a global player, of its pursuit of international attractiveness, and of the increasing need for international cooperation beyond the EU or the Erasmus+ countries to address increasingly complex global challenges.

Arqus appreciates the need to move towards digitally issued degree diplomas, but welcomes the caution with which the Blueprint addresses the issue ("preferably in digital format") given the current state of affairs with regard to digital certification in many contexts, and in the light of prior negative experience of attempts to impose single digital solutions to vastly differing institutions and administrative contexts without sufficient preparation or coordination.

As indicated by several of the policy experimentation projects along with EDLab, whilst the European Degree (Label) is an important tool for progress in facilitating full-cycle joint degrees at EQF 6, 7 and 8 levels, Arqus would advocate for extension of the scope to cover EQF5. Similarly, the common criteria to be fulfilled by programmes awarding the European Degree (Label) could usefully be presented in a format differentiating the three (four) cycles; this would offer clearer information and especially identify differences between EQF5, 6, and 7 on the one hand and EQF8, the doctoral cycle, on the other, given the quite different nature of this cycle.

Finally and importantly, Arqus would welcome a similar framework (criteria, certification) for the issuing of joint European Microcredentials, to reflect the importance of this newer, more flexible kind of academic offer and to ensure that the regulatory processes currently underway in many countries do not establish divergent or mutually contradictory conditions for this academic offer, thus producing a similarly difficult situation to that which universities have undergone for joint full-cycle degrees.

Arqus looks forward to the constitution of the European Degree Policy Lab and the holding of the Annual European Degree Forum as necessary spaces for further discussion and coordination among all stakeholders, not least Member States, given the risk of divergent solutions mentioned above, and in order to maintain the momentum gained as a result of the policy experimentation projects and the Package. The presence of universities in this Policy Lab is essential, to ensure representation of those at the workforce of the design, development and delivery of joint degrees. It is once again to be reminded that the implementation of the European Degree must be for the entire European higher education system, and in no way limited to universities participating in the European Universities Initiative, although the role of the alliances as testbeds is and will no doubt continue to act as a catalyst for reform.

Arqus would like to underline once again the risk of European Degrees becoming an elitist form of academic offer, if bespoke funding is not guaranteed to allow ALL students to participate in an equal basis. The embedded mobility in these programmes, while ensuring positive learning impact, makes them inaccessible to many for financial and personal reasons. Arqus advocates small-scale adaptations of the current Erasmus+ regulations to allow students to receive sufficient funding for all periods abroad established by their respective joint programmes in all cycles. Similarly, the portability of national grants as support for students on these programmes should be fully guaranteed.

Similarly, Arqus welcomes the proposals to set up additional Erasmus+ actions to fund the design and development stages of new joint programmes, along the lines of the Erasmus Mundus design measures, without which it will be difficult to ensure the viability of many initiatives, particularly at EQF5 and EQF6 levels, where no other funding mechanisms are currently available.

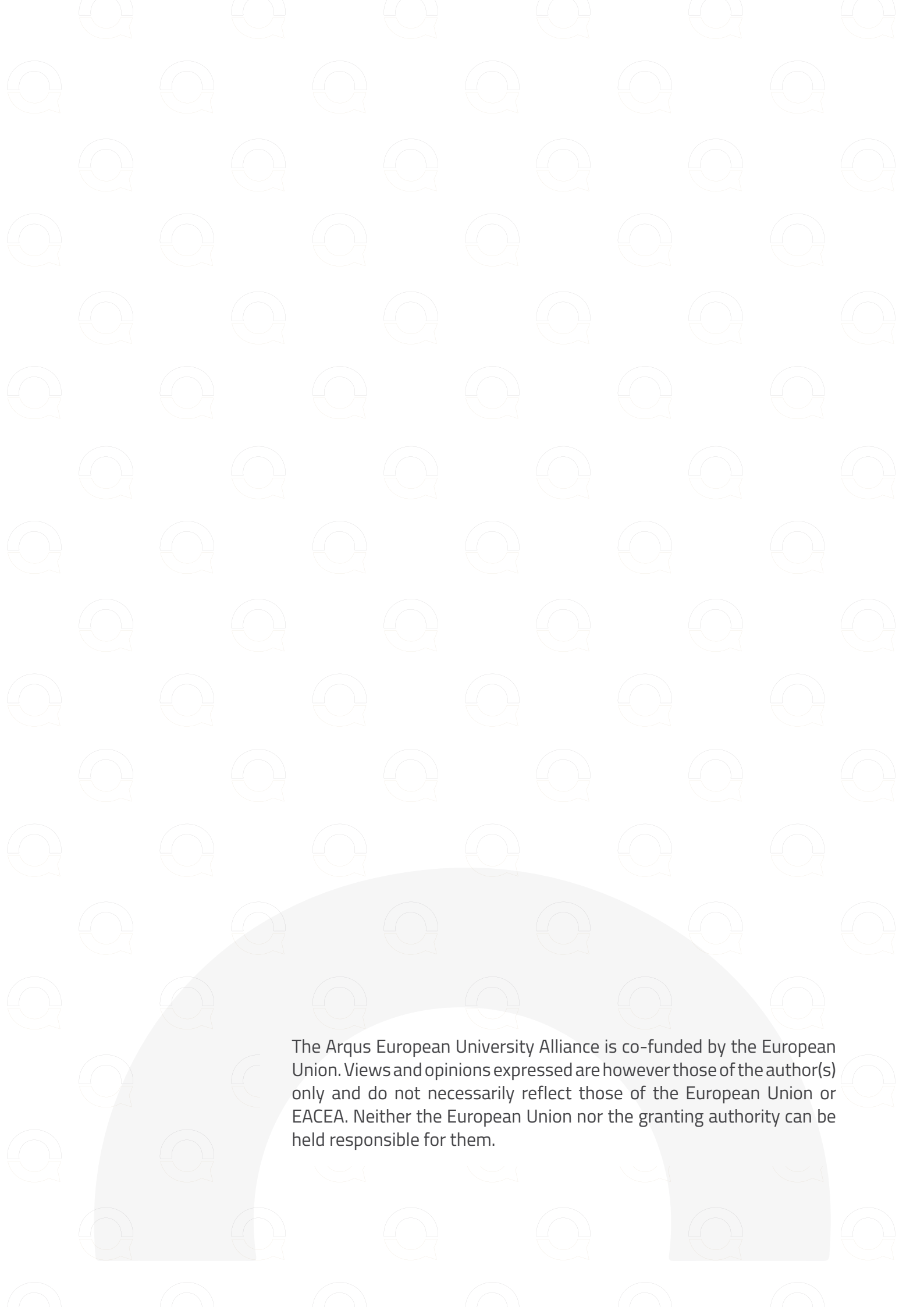
Moving beyond the Blueprint for the European Degree itself, its coincidence with draft Council Recommendations on enhanced Quality Assurance and on improving the attractiveness of careers in higher education is timely.

With regard to Quality Assurance, Arqus subscribes the longstanding demand from universities for simplification of procedures, non-duplication, and a strong move toward institutional accreditation, rather than time-consuming and over-bureaucratized programme or field accreditation. The European Approach for the Quality Assurance of joint programmes, where it is applied, already allows for situations of institutional accreditation where institutionally accredited HEIs can apply the principles of the Approach in their internal QA systems. The extension of institutional accreditation to alliance level, in cases where robust internal alliance QA systems have been developed, is a logical consequence of this move, and would most certainly simplify procedures for alliances and similarly stable consortia.

As for attractive careers in higher education, Arqus especially welcomes the Draft Recommendation and the numerous measures it contemplates since, like most alliances, Arqus has experienced the difficulty of ensuring dedication of time and effort by academics and professional staff to the design and development of joint programmes, as well as other alliance activities, in the light of the lack of clear incentives for staff to do so. It is imperative that institutions and systems provide frameworks for recognition of the enormous effort and dedication devoted to transnational academic activities such as joint programmes, if their success is to be guaranteed.

3. Concluding Words

At what the Alliance considers a potential turning point in the solution to many of the longstanding issues the Alliance and its constituent members have been facing, Arqus looks forward to future discussions and the preparation of consensual regulatory reform, and pledges to participate where possible in European, national, institutional and grassroots initiatives to support the smooth and successful implementation of the European Degree, and to encourage other stakeholders, most notably national and regional authorities, to move forward in a coordinated fashion.



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