



Integrating Digital  
Collaborative  
Environments into  
Joint Programmes

# HANDBOOK and POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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## PART 3

### Main challenges and key policy recommendations

*about*

*the digitalisation of Joint Programmes*



## Glossary

**Blended learning:** A model combining face-to-face classroom teaching and the innovative use of ICT technologies. Experts often associate blended learning with the redesign of the educational environment and the learning experience, thus contributing to the creation of a “community of inquiry”<sup>1</sup>.

**Blended Mobility:** combination of physical mobility with a virtual component, aimed at facilitating collaborative online learning and teamwork. The virtual component can be used to prepare students for physical mobility, or it can be used after physical mobility, to deepen cultural learning, or it can even take place during the physical mobility to directly enhance some aspects of it<sup>2</sup>.

**iOOCs:** Interactive Open Online Courses, combining content presented in a similar format to MOOCs, with an interactive component which includes weekly synchronous discussion sessions in small groups with the support of a dialogue facilitator, to encourage intercultural communication<sup>3</sup>.

**Joint programme:** the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes defines a ‘joint programme’ as ‘an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions (HEIs) from EHEA countries, and leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree’. This is the most official definition of a joint programme, although clearly a joint programme can be offered by institutions from different countries, whether or not (some of) these institutions are located within or outside of the EHEA<sup>4</sup>.

**Joint degree:** the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes defines a ‘joint degree’ as ‘a single document awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme and nationally acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme’<sup>5</sup>.

**Double / multiple degrees:** the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes defines ‘double or multiple degrees’ as ‘separate degrees awarded by HEIs offering the joint programme attesting the successful completion of this programme (if two degrees are awarded by two institutions, this is a ‘double degree’)’<sup>6</sup>.

**MOOC:** MOOC stands for massive open online course. Massive, as there is generally no participation limit, thousands can enrol for the same course. Open, as it is accessible to a large audience of learners: the hosting institution usually does not require any formal entry requirement and the course is free of charge. The whole course is delivered online, including assessment and additional services (even though personal contact with other participants or tutors is a possibility).

**Online degree programmes:** A degree programme, which the student attends fully or predominantly online.

**Virtual mobility:** Educational practices that allow students from one educational institution to follow courses organised at a different institution (usually based in a different country) without having to leave home. The focus of Virtual Mobility is to provide subject knowledge by taking advantage

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/digihe%20new%20version.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://frames-project.eu/outputs/toolkit/>

<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://frames-project.eu/outputs/toolkit/>

<sup>4</sup> Source: <https://impea.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Joint-Programmes-from-A-to-Z-Report-2020.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Source: <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/definitions/>

<sup>6</sup> Source: <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/definitions/>

of complementary expertise, and does not require the student to interact with peers from the host institution<sup>7</sup>.

**Virtual exchange:** Virtual Exchange (VE) is a practice that consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people online exchange sessions in which constructive communication and interaction take place with the support of educators or facilitators

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<sup>7</sup> Source: <https://frames-project.eu/outputs/toolkit/>

# Key challenges

## Joint Programmes

As mentioned in previous sections of the Handbook, the European Strategy for Universities (18<sup>th</sup> January 2022) and the Council Recommendation adopted on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2022 make clear reference to the need to eliminate barriers to the development of JPs, and in particular of joint degrees, in order to advance in the transformation of the European university system.

Despite the repeated commitments at successive inter-ministerial conferences to eliminate barriers, the shared adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines, or the setting up in 2015 of the European Approach to the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, there are still daunting challenges posed by the implementation of JPs in many EU and EHEA countries.

These obstacles exist at institutional, regional, national and European level, and are of diverse nature: regulatory, cultural, financial, and social. Major barriers identified by the GO-DIJIP consortium (including the European Alliances which GO-DIJIP institutions are part of) are:

- Major divergence in quality assurance procedures between national contexts (institutional accreditation versus programme accreditation; ex ante versus ex post accreditation; major differences in the need for re-accreditation following programme changes or new partners; diverse time scales for validity of accreditation), leading at times to the need to accredit the same programme several times;
- Some national contexts have no QAA registered with EQAR;
- Some national contexts oblige universities to only use national QAAs;
- Major divergence in complex bureaucratic procedures for the approval and implementation of new programmes (internal institutional QA systems, QAAs, authorisation from different regional and national authorities), procedures often taking up to two full years before a programme can be advertised to potential students;
- Divergent national legislation on the length of study programmes (e.g. Spain where national EQF6 programmes are 240 ECTS, with the only exception of programmes developed within EU Alliances);
- Divergent national legislation on tuition and other fees;
- Divergent national legislation on the use of different languages of instruction;
- Divergent national legislation on the issuing of diplomas: authority issuing; format of diplomas; payment of fees for diploma issuing;
- Divergent funding mechanisms for the delivery of programmes and staffing;
- Divergent selection and admission regulations and processes;
- Lack of funds for student and staff mobility (including ineligibility for Erasmus+ funds for those registered simultaneously at “home” and “host” universities);
- Lack of full adoption of ECTS culture (beyond the formality of the credit system);
- Lack of trust in other EHEA systems despite the existence of strong QA structures, leading to the questioning of automatic recognition;
- Employers’ lack of knowledge or recognition of joint degrees as opposed to well-established national degrees.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Such obstacles were also analysed as part of the needs analysis prepared in the framework of the application submitted by Arqus European University Alliance (of which the University of Padova is part of) under the European Joint Degree Label Call in October 2022.

In addition to this, the award of **joint degrees** is hampered by incompatible requirements in the delivery of joint transnational educational activities and programmes, e.g. differences in grading and credit allocations, even when following the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); curricula with different minimum or maximum ECTS credits per course, complex and diverging accreditation mechanisms and different forms of institutional autonomy (see [PART 1](#) for additional information).

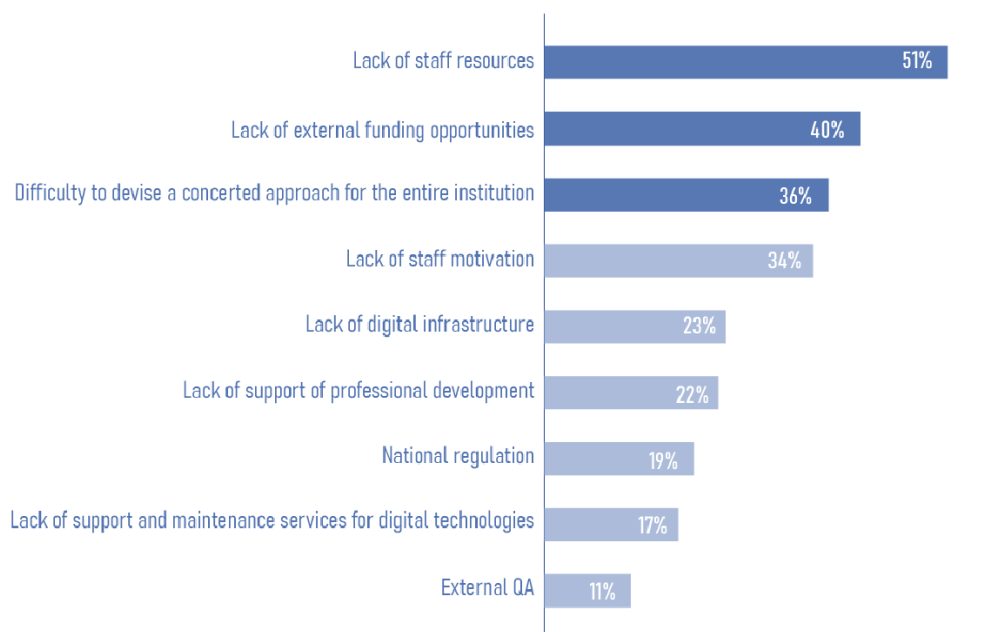
HEIs across Europe are increasingly aware of these challenges and have tried to address them at different levels - institutional, national and European. This awareness has also grown during the first implementation phase of the European University Initiative. Each of the alliances has analysed the difficulties involved, through focus groups, seminars and meetings with the European Commission, national authorities, quality assurance agencies, and desk research.

It has become increasingly clear that current challenges related to the full implementation of JP within the EHEA, given their complex and diverse nature, require a broad-based, multi-level and collective effort for their elimination, often impeded by the narrowly national contexts in which debates occur.

## Digitalisation of teaching and learning

EUA’s survey report outlines that, “while the situation of individual institutions and systems is quite diverse, there is a **strong alignment between what leadership identifies as top enablers and barriers to DELT across Europe**. This is about the implementation of strategic approaches throughout the entire institution, requiring the proactive participation of staff and students, staff development, and funding for building the necessary resources. Other external problems, such as regulation and external quality assurance, were found challenging by larger numbers of institutions only in some countries”<sup>17</sup>.

Top three barriers to digitally enhanced learning and teaching



**Figure 4 Q14:** What are the top 3 barriers to digitally enhanced learning and teaching at your institution? (please select your top three choices) n= 368

<sup>17</sup> <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/digihe%20new%20version.pdf> p. 47

As far as national regulation is concerned, as also confirmed by the analysis presented in Part 1 of this Handbook, the scenario around recognition and flexibility in DELT implementation varies widely across Europe. Also the [Bologna Process Implementation report](#) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018, p. 77) pointed out that few countries prioritise adapting programmes to digital provision and related certification processes. In practice this can mean that use of blended learning is tolerated as long as it remains a marginal component of the course. If digitally enhanced provision exceeds a certain percentage, the course would have to be re-accredited under different rules (e.g. as in Italy). Moreover, national regulations and external QA often require the physical presence of staff and students at the university.

## Digitalisation in Joint Programmes

Digitalisation in JPs certainly offers many opportunities, as described in detail in Part 2 of this Handbook. Yet, being so new and experimental, it still poses many challenges which not only combine the challenges related to JPs and DELT presented above, but also add additional ones. Below some of these challenges, as identified by the GO-DIJIP team through desk research, surveys, and feedback by participants in various project activities and training courses:

- Lack of awareness of possible opportunities related to JP digitalisation
- Lack of staff expertise in this field
- Still limited best practices in designing JP with strong digital elements
- Limited exchange of expertise and experiences between JP coordinators
- Regulatory obstacles related to integration of virtual mobility / Virtual Exchange / blended mobility into university degree courses, included JPs (e.g. in Italy)
- Regulatory obstacles and/or absence of regulations related to the development and implementation of fully online JPs, without physical mobility (e.g. in Norway or Cina)
- Obstacles in applying for funding programmes to support JPs (e.g. Erasmus Mundus) for fully blended/hybrid JP, since physical mobility is still a compulsory requirement.
- Lack of interoperability between digital infrastructures of HEIs across the EU, linked to the unevenness in individual HEIs' capacity and available resources to develop and access such digital infrastructure, limiting the potential of online collaborative learning and teaching: this is extremely relevant when looking at the emergence of European (virtual) inter-university campuses and platforms<sup>18</sup>.

In the past two years, the GO-DIJIP project has tried to address the first three obstacles by offering comprehensive information and training resources to develop staff capacity in this field. Through this Handbook (ref. next section) it also aims at providing a set of recommendations to address the other challenges mentioned above, which certainly require reflection at a wider and higher policy level.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0017>

# Key recommendations

The following section provides summary recommendations developed by the GO-DIJIP team to fully exploit the potential of digitalisation in JPs.

The proposed recommendations are in line with EHEA key values and build upon more general policy recommendations in the field of Higher Education such as:

- “Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA” prepared by the BFUG Advisory Group 2 on Learning and Teaching (2020), structured around the need for student-centred learning, the enhancement of teaching, and the overarching importance of national and international dialogue involving all stakeholders;
- Recommendations for “Improving Digitally Enhanced Learning and Teaching in European Higher Education Institutions” put forward by EUA in collaboration with other European institutions, focusing amongst others on the importance on peer exchange, training opportunities for staff in charge of digital transformation, data collection & analysis, policy exchange and strategic discussion at national and international level (making best use of existing networks), etc.
- Council Recommendation on “Building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation” proposed by the European Commission and adopted by the Council in May 2022.

The latter document is particularly relevant in this context as it calls for important changes to support both JPs and online collaborative teaching & learning, such as to:

- **Encourage and make it easier** for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) engaged in transnational cooperation to provide **Joint Programmes** and award joint degrees;
- Facilitate the delivery at national level of a **joint European Degree Label**;
- Enable the full implementation of the **European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes**, without further additional national requirements or conditions to the use of the European Approach; ensure that the external evaluation of joint transnational programmes can be done by one single agency registered in the **European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)** and that the outcomes are automatically accepted in all other higher education systems concerned, without adding further national requirements or procedural steps;
- Enable HEIs to **develop and implement innovative joint transnational education activities** by allowing them to put in place suitable approaches and measures in relation to, amongst others: (a) sharing of **online learning** in the overall educational offer; (b) **sharing of student mobility (physical, virtual learning or blended)** embedded in the joint educational activity; and (c) sharing and organisation of internships, work-based learning activities, challenge-based and interdisciplinary approaches; (c) working towards more **coherent approaches for learning mobility** in terms of admissions systems, academic calendars, tuition fee systems, access to and use of higher education facilities over summer/holiday months.
- **Include flexible learning pathways**, such as small learning experiences leading to micro-credentials,
- Support **embedded mobility** in joint transnational educational programmes (physical, virtual learning, blended) in a more systematic and flexible way, at all levels, to allow a larger body of students, academics and researchers to benefit from the dynamics of integrated higher education cooperation and to promote balanced talent circulation.
- **Foster the digitalisation of mobility management** within multilateral partnerships of HEIs by upscaling the use of the European Student Card Initiative

- Support the development of **high-quality virtual collaborative learning** as an integral part of teaching, learning and research, to foster and facilitate inclusive and student-centred transnational cooperation, that complements face-to-face interactions, and in particular to: (a) Support HEIs to develop virtual collaborative online international learning models as an integral part of a hybrid education, including through leadership commitment, strategic planning, robust and internationalised pedagogical training and support services, and appropriate funding. (b) Valorise and recognise - in their career assessment - the time spent by academics in the development of new innovative pedagogies through transnational cooperation. (c) Support European Universities alliances and similar institutionalised cooperation models in their efforts to pool expertise and resources to develop and implement **joint digital strategies and shared interoperable IT infrastructure**, for example by granting mutual access to online learning and research environments, learning management systems, digital libraries or massive open online course (MOOC) platforms, training and support services, seamless access to findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable (FAIR) data and other interoperable services. (d) Support the piloting and testing of open source solutions to overcome common challenges, thus contributing to the interoperability, digital readiness, data sovereignty and responsibility of higher education systems.

**The GO-DIJIP team fully endorses the above recommendations and adds the following ones with specific reference to the integration of digital elements in JPs:**

- **Continue raising awareness of possible opportunities related to JP digitalisation**, at institutional, national and international level (e.g. during EU events on JPs, in the context of Working groups of European Alliances and other networks and associations, etc.)
- **Continue supporting training programmes on digital tools & skills** specifically targeting JP coordinators, administrators, students
- **Integrate and further develop the repository of best practices** collected by GO-DIJIP through the Amplifier Platform **into the future Erasmus Mundus Support Structure** (to be implemented soon<sup>19</sup>).
- Make sure to open up the Support Structure to European University Alliances and other JP practitioners, therefore not limiting it to Erasmus Mundus courses.
- Make the necessary regulatory changes so to **ensure that national legislation allows for maximum flexibility with regards to the integration of virtual mobility / Virtual Exchange / blended mobility** into university degree courses, including JPs
- **Facilitate the awarding and full recognition of ECTS related to virtual courses** (including Virtual Exchange, Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes, online courses, etc.)
- **Further analyse current obstacles in EHEA countries towards the development and implementation of fully online JPs** – this could e.g. be done in the framework of the European Joint Degree Label Call.

We hope that these recommendations can be taken into account by national and European policy makers, with a view to advancing towards Bologna objectives and contributing to a more inclusive, innovative and interconnected higher education.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://etendering.ted.europa.eu/cft/cft-display.html?cftId=11565>