

Statement of position on the European Commission's roadmap towards a European degree

*Processed by the General Assembly of the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) in Norrköping on 19 March 2025.
Approved by the Board of SUHF on 6 May 2025.*

- Positive overall stance
- Clarify the relation to the Bologna instruments
- A European degree needs to be linked more clearly to users' requirements
- Clarify which bureaucratic obstacles a European degree can (and cannot) remove
- Clarify the relation between the European degree and European label
- Avoid building "cross-institutional" systems for quality assurance, and instead prioritise implementation of the Bologna instruments

Positive overall stance

The SUHF welcomes the Commission's proposal for a roadmap concerning a European degree as a way to stimulate the dialogue about increased international interoperability in higher education and how such an instrument could be designed. In the continuing process, we call for a more in-depth analysis of the nature of the needs, i.e. which problems a European degree is intended to solve. We are also positive towards the continuing work on experimenting with models and criteria for a European degree.

However, a central prerequisite for work at the EU level is that education policy is a national area of responsibility, which means that the EU is to act by supporting a harmonisation of national education systems so that the EU's education-related decisions can be made with a consensus between the member countries.

This means for a start that a European degree must be integrated into 27 different national traditions and systems, which include many different internal interconnected components.

A consensus on a European degree can therefore only be achieved if it creates clear added value according to the different national systems.

Clarify the relation to the Bologna instruments and avoid duplicate systems

The continuing work needs to clarify the relation between a European degree and the Bologna instruments. A European degree would need to create clear added value in relation to existing Bologna tools and must not result in parallel or duplicate structures that make the current system more difficult and complex.

An important reason for the Bologna Process's historical success in promoting the coordination of systems for higher education has been its clear focus on the higher education sector's needs and that the process is based on voluntary cooperation, in which each country has decided their own rate of implementation. This meant that the sector felt it had ownership of the process and could therefore develop the dialogue and trust needed to reach an agreement on common principles. To succeed, a European degree needs to be based on a similar dynamic.

A European degree needs to be linked more closely to users' requirements

The Commission's roadmap justifies a European degree on the grounds of several broad objectives, including development of a globally competitive European labour force and meeting the needs of the labour market. We have here a possible intention to direct a European degree towards certain types of degree programmes that the Commission considers are particularly important for Europe's competitiveness (such as programmes on green and digital technologies).

The SUHF would like to emphasise the importance of focusing on the creation of added value for the primary users of a European degree. Higher education institutions will implement and utilise a new instrument only if it is perceived as creating clear added value for students, the labour market and society. It is therefore of great importance that the continuing work on the European degree identifies and enhances added value for students, higher education institutions, the labour market and society. If, for competitive reasons, initiatives are needed for certain types of degree programmes this is in fact done fastest and best at the national level.

Clarify which bureaucratic obstacles a European degree can remove and what the implementation would cost

The Commission emphasises in its roadmap that a European degree will remove bureaucratic obstacles (red tape) to cross-border cooperation.

The SUHF welcomes this ambition, but also calls for a clearer analysis of which obstacles could actually be removed, which will remain, and what an implementation of a European degree would cost. Illuminating the consequences of various options, including the national perspective, should be a central element in the continuing work. It is particularly important that the results of the pilot studies conducted by the European Commission are thoroughly analysed.

There is a risk that the criteria required to achieve a European degree will be added on top of existing criteria and requirements that must be fulfilled in order to issue a degree (at national or institutional level). Implementation of a European degree would in this case require significant administration at higher education institutions and also take resources

and innovative capacity from core activities. The exact need for support depends on how detailed the European degree is and how much it differs from existing degrees.

Clarify the relation between the European degree and European label

The Commission's roadmap differentiates between the European degree and the European label. The SUHF considers that the relation between the two instruments is unclear and needs to be specified in more detail in the continuing process.

According to the roadmap, a European degree qualifies the holder for further studies and is automatically approved by all EU countries. The European label will not have such outcomes, but is rather intended to act solely as a type of quality indicator for marketing purposes. However, both instruments would be based on the same criteria, which are to be defined jointly at the EU level. The Commission considers that this makes it possible to launch both instruments in parallel, in a process in which each member country could "proceed, step by step, towards a jointly defined goal with two starting points: a European degree and a preparatory European label, which indicates that the European criteria have been fulfilled."

An obvious objection is that this risks leading to fragmentation and complexity. For example, different conditions would continue to apply for different members of a university alliance. Another objection is that the two instruments appear to point in different directions regarding the choice of common criteria. A European degree should, in principle, be based on a few, not overly prescriptive criteria, in order for the instrument to be easy to use and reduce administrative costs. A degree label on the other hand needs to be linked to relatively demanding criteria, in order to indicate high quality. This makes it difficult to see how a gradual introduction would work, where a label acts as a preparatory step for a European degree.

To sum up, the SUHF draws the conclusion that a European label seems easier to introduce and could contribute to accelerating implementation of the Bologna instruments, such as ECTS, evaluation in line with European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), and the three-cycle system.

Avoid building cross-institutional systems for quality assurance

The Commission presented its roadmap as a package along with, among other things, a proposal for a Council Recommendation on quality assurance. The Council Recommendation develops building blocks for a "European framework" for quality assurance. This framework is "cross-institutional", i.e. it is intended as a transnational mechanism in which several higher education institutions in the same alliance are to build common systems for quality assurance. The idea is that this will enable external quality review at the alliance level.

The SUHF does not support the vision of the alliances developing joint quality assurance systems. There are several reasons for this. The main reason is that it creates duplicate work, which risks undermining the cohesion and efficiency of existing national quality assurance systems. Another reason is that it deviates from the quality assurance method developed in the Bologna Process and which is based on the idea of developing mutual recognition between national systems.

We note that the Commission's proposal does not elucidate in detail why the Bologna Process instruments, usually referred to as the "European approach", are not sufficient. Better implementation of Bologna's recommendation on quality assurance would be a better way to proceed.