The European degree blueprint: United in or divided by diversity?

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Abstract

In 2024, the European Commission announced the latest development in the European Education Area: the European diploma. The aim is to create a new type of qualification that will be automatically recognised throughout the EU. This project responds to various trends currently observed. For example, the consolidation of the knowledge economy; the need to achieve strategic autonomy; and the urgency of combating growing social inequalities, which contribute to creating polarised societies.

Analysing the European Diploma from a sociological perspective reveals its paradoxical nature. The Diploma seeks to be inclusive and to foster European identity, yet it is intrinsically exclusive. This is due to two of the programme's requirements: multilingualism and international mobility. This article will show how, while these elements can benefit students, they can also reproduce discriminatory dynamics. Attention will be paid to understanding how social origin can affect language learning and the possibility of international mobility.

Keywords: Inclusion; Equality of opportunity; Access; European degree; Higher education; Transnational education.

Resumen. *El plan por un título europeo: ¿Unidos o divididos por la diversidad?*

En 2024, la Comisión Europea anunció el último adelanto del Espacio Europeo de la Educación: el Título europeo. El objetivo es crear un nuevo tipo de titulación que será reconocida automáticamente en toda la UE. Este proyecto responde a diversas tendencias que se observan actualmente. Por ejemplo, la consolidación de la economía del conocimiento; la necesidad de alcanzar la autonomía estratégica; y la urgencia de combatir las crecientes desigualdades sociales, que contribuyen a crear sociedades polarizadas.

Analizar el Título europeo desde una perspectiva sociológica pone en evidencia su naturaleza paradójica. El Título busca ser inclusivo y fomentar la identidad europea, sin embargo, es intrínsecamente exclusivo. Esto se debe a dos de los requisitos del programa: el multilingüismo y la movilidad internacional. Este artículo mostrará cómo, si bien estos elementos pueden beneficiar a los estudiantes, también pueden reproducir dinámicas discriminatorias. Se atenderá a la comprensión de cómo el origen social puede afectar al aprendizaje de lenguas ya la posibilidad de realizar movilidades internacionales.

Palabras clave: Inclusión; Igualdad de oportunidades; Acceso; Título europeo; Educación superior; Educación transnacional.

Resum. *El pla per un títol europeu: Units o dividits per la diversitat?*

El 2024, la Comissió va anunciar el darrer avenç de l'Espai Europeu de l'Educació: el Títol europeu. L'objectiu és crear un nou tipus de titulació que serà reconeguda automàticament a tota la UE. Aquest projecte respon a diverses tendències que s'observen actualment. Per exemple, la consolidació de l'economia del coneixement; la necessitat d'assolir l'autonomia estratègica; i la urgència de combatre les creixents desigualtats socials, que contribueixen a crear societats polaritzades.

Analitzar el Títol europeu des d'una perspectiva sociològica posa en evidència la seva naturalesa paradoxal. El Títol busca ser inclusiu i fomentar la identitat europea, però, és intrínsecament exclusiu. Això és degut a dos dels requisits del programa: el multilingüisme i la mobilitat internacional. Aquest article mostrarà com, si bé aquests elements poden beneficiar els estudiants, també poden reproduir dinàmiques discriminatòries. S'atendrà a la comprensió de com l'origen social pot afectar l'aprenentatge de llengües i la possibilitat de fer mobilitats internacionals.

Paraules clau: Inclusió; Igualtat d'oportunitats; Accés; Títol europeu; Educació superior; Educació transnacional.

Summary

1. Introduction

2. The European degree: concept, context of emergence, rationale and regulatory framework

3. The European degree: the creation of a dangerous double-standard, or an actual harmonising force?

4. Re-thinking the European degree

5. Concluding remarks

6. References

1.   INTRODUCTION

On the 27th of March of 2024, the European Commission (EC, hereinafter) announced a new project: the creation of a European degree. This initiative emerges at the darkest hour of cooperation and harmonisation in the field of higher education. The Bologna Process seemed to have reached a halt: countries were far from implementing several key points, or even advancing in the contrary direction in some cases (Gaebel & Zhang, 2018). This directly impacted the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, hereinafter), which was beginning to stagnate. Key goals of the EHEA such as promoting student mobility up to 20 % and increasing student support are yet far to be met: international student mobility at the European Union (EU, hereinafter) level stands today at 8,8 %, and only one educational system[1] has created an efficient portability student support net.[2]

Thus, as it appeared, the European degree was a logical next step: a new and revolutionary idea was needed to carry the project forward. Building on the undeniable success of the Erasmus programme (including exchanges and joint programmes, but not only)[3] the blueprint for a new European degree was presented as an unprecedented advancement of the European project. The ultimate tool to foster European identity and cooperation across Member states.

The European degree answers to a series of needs previously identified, such as the importance of catering to the knowledge economy, the imperative to foster social cohesion and European identity and the need of advancing towards strategic autonomy (notoriously at the scientific level). Furthermore, it is in line with the Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the

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[1] Belgium French Community

[2] EACEA (2024). *The European higher education area in 2024. Bologna process implementation report.*

[3] EC Press release (9.9.2022). *Celebrating 35 years of the Erasmus programme*

outcomes of learning periods abroad. Therefore, the European degree appears as a strategic and logical response to these needs.

In this article, the initiative will be analysed in depth, dissecting the European degree blueprint to understand, firstly, what it consists on. Secondly, to follow the narrative that surrounds it and the issues it gives a response to (both at the micro-level, and from a more general perspective). Thirdly, a reflection will be sparked assessing to what extent the European degree has the potential to comply with the proposed goals, and the possible consequences of implementing the model in its current format. Arguments from the perspective of equality of opportunity will highlight how the proposed project has the potential to materialise, reinforce and promote a series of already existing structural inequalities, instead of offering a widespread solution or aiming to reduce them. Therefore, a series of proposals will be put forward in order to mitigate these dynamics of potential social selection, aiming to contribute to the creation of a European degree that encapsulates the core values of the EHEA such as equality and inclusivity. Thus, allowing it to unlock its full potential as a tool for harmonisation, bridging existing gaps between educative systems in the EU and fostering cooperation among institutions.

2.   THE EUROPEAN DEGREE: CONCEPT, CONTEXT OF EMERGENCE, RATIONALE AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

2.1.   European degree: what is it, exactly?

As defined in the EC's communication, the European degree would consist on a brand-new degree type to be delivered jointly at the national, regional or institutional level, which would be automatically recognised everywhere within the EU's territory.[4] Transnational in nature, this new degree would be awarded jointly among several higher education institutions (HEIs, hereinafter) in the EU, and would be based upon a set of common criteria previously established. The EC recently unveiled an action plan setting up the steps to be followed, upon which this paper will heavily rely (Burneikaitė et al., 2021). Considering the announcement was published on the 27th of March of 2024, availability of literature is reduced, and sources are limited to personal communications with key stakeholders, official EU publications and ongoing updates.

The European degree represents a key stepping stone in the full development of the European Education Area (EEA, hereinafter), which is to be set by 2025 (Heriard, 2021). Nevertheless, when looking at the broader picture, it can be argued this initiative will potentially advance many other priorities. For instance, strengthening the internal economy by training a new generation of workers capable of facing a

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[4] Blueprint for a European degree. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social committee and the Committee of the Regions. (2024).

rapidly changing and globalised world (Gaebel & Zhang, 2018). Or providing a more fertile soil for cross-national collaboration between HEIs, which currently face burdensome bureaucratic processes to establish fruitful cooperation among one another (Burneikaitė et al., 2021).

This ambitious project does not only aim to contribute to the EU in terms of increased competitiveness and a more resilient workforce in the age of the knowledge-economy, but also to enhance social cohesion and strengthen European identity (Burneikaitė et al., 2021). Thus, as a main pillar of the EEA, the European degree carries in its core the same guiding values (equality and inclusivity) and strives to fulfil the same goals.

2.2.   Context of emergence: narrative, rationale, and goals

As aforementioned, the European degree is put forward in the context of the EEA. Formally established in 2018,[5] in consequence to previous deliberations at the informal level. It tackles education in all of stages and aims to foster collaboration among Member states as to improve national education systems. The EEA intends to ensure that education is accessible, inclusive and of high quality across the EU, as enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights.[6] Therefore, as it is integrated within this framework, the European degree serves and aims to advance these common goals. As the internally established deadline for the operationalisation of the EEA approaches, the European degree represents a key strategic element to revitalise this process. For instance, the need to foster cooperation and mobility, modernising education and training systems (including the integration of skills needed for the future, such as digital ones), and the creation of a shared European vision on the field.

The creation of the EEA marks a turning point in terms of European integration. Historically, education has been mostly at the side lines of the process of Europeanisation, not due to a lack of relevance, but rather of competences. It remains closely intertwined to national sovereignty even today, and the EU only has a supporting or complementing competence according to Article 6 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU, 2012). Nevertheless, it can be argued that the role of education (especially higher education) in the EU has evolved, as the logic of social investment takes root (Morel et al., 2012). It is now often linked with matters related to the internal market, competitiveness and innovation, as academic and professional recognition become increasingly interdependent (Kortese, 2020).

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[5] Council conclusions on moving towards a vision of a European Education Area (2018/C 195/04).
[6] The Action Plan sets out concrete initiatives to turn the European Pillar of Social Rights into reality. It proposes headline targets for the EU by 2030. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

The European degree offers a framework upon which synergies between HEIs can be forged and exploited, a programme that caters to the increasingly internationally focused student population, and a statement in favour of the Erasmus+ programme, the EU's success story (Cairns, 2017). These are the goals specified on the official documents published by the EC. Nevertheless, when analysing the narrative surrounding the European degree, it can be deduced that the project also responds to deeper underlying patterns, which shape the EU's priorities and political direction in every aspect, including education. For instance, three key trends are identified: the emergence of the knowledge-based economy (Busemeyer et al., 2020), the increased need for European strategic autonomy in response to renewed geopolitical tensions (Anghel et al., 2020), and the heightened social fragmentation in the EU (Garau et al., 2021).

Concerning the first point, the knowledge-based economy is characterised by an increasing demand for highly skilled workers in the labour market (Paye, 1997). Therefore, higher education adopts a new importance in this context. Not only at the normative level (as enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights), but also at the economic one. Higher education is now an investment (Morel et al., 2012) to which countries need to commit if they do not want to be left behind. Therefore, even though education is not a shared nor exclusive competence of the EU, as an entity regularising the internal market and overseeing economic activity, an acute interest towards higher education has been solidified and is justified by the emergence of this new economic model.

Secondly, safeguarding and enhancing the EU's strategic autonomy is now more important than ever, as highlighted in the Strategic Compass.[7] There exist two main leading factors. On the one hand, globalisation has increased interdependencies across the globe, and individuals with a transnational education have now an edge to navigate this new interconnected labour market. On the other hand, renewed geopolitical tensions have highlighted the overdependency of Europe on external sources, emphasising the need to build resilience in terms of autonomy; in this case, promoting scientific autonomy. While the closest example (geographically speaking) might be the invasion of Ukraine, other ongoing tensions need to be considered.

For instance, the conflict in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine, which is increasing internal fractions at the EU level and having consequential impact on the exports of many Southern European countries relying on routes crossing the Red Sea (ACCIÓ, 2023). Furthermore, the balance of power is shifting, and China is redefining its role within the international community (while increasing its influence at the EU level through bilateral partnerships) (Adamczyk & Rutkowska, 2021). Therefore, as emphasised in the Strategic Compass, strengthening the European educational system to form a new generation of workers that are highly skilled, transnationally trained and

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[7] The European Union and its Member States formally approved the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence in 2022, just a few weeks after the return of high-intensity war on our continent (EEAS).

able to fuel innovation within the EU's economy has become a new pivotal priority to ensure energetic, economic, material, and territorial security.

Thirdly, inequalities are a global phenomenon, and consequently, also affect the dynamics within the EU. However, recent years have showcased a new and concerning trend: while economic inequalities between countries still persist, inequalities within countries are gaining precedence (Chancel, 2020; Hickel, 2018). Data shows that between 2010 and 2019, socioeconomic inequalities between EU countries have been alleviated, while the ones within Member states have widened and deepened (Szymańska, 2021). This poses a threat to social cohesion, understood in the European context as "process directed towards inequality reduction and, more generally, towards protection from social exclusion" (Vergolini, 2011, p. 198). It can be argued that, both actual inequalities and the perception of thereof, interact negatively with civic integration, feeling of belonging, and ultimately, social cohesion (Ibid). Therefore, in a context where European civil society is increasingly fragmented, strengthening access to education and improving training systems emerges as moral, social, economic and political imperative, as education continues to represent one of the most effective tools to reduce income inequalities (Abdullah et al., 2013).

2.3.   Legal basis

To begin with primary law, the EU does not have a shared nor an exclusive competence in the field of education. It has, in any case, a supporting or complementary one (Article 6, TFEU). Nevertheless, in several instances of EU primary law, education is declared as an element towards which the EU shall at least have consideration. For example, article 9 of the TFEU, establishes that in defining an implementing its policies and activities, the EU shall take into account several factors, among them, guarantee an adequate high level of education and training:

> In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health (TFEU, 2012).

Furthermore, Title XII of the TFEU on education, vocational training, youth and sports establishes in article 165 that "the Union shall contribute to the development of quality education, by means falling within its competences". Additionally, the right to education is enshrined in Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFREU, hereinafter):

1. Everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training.
2. This right includes the possibility to receive free compulsory education.

3. The freedom to found educational establishments with due respect for democratic principles and the right of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions shall be respected, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of such freedom and right.

It must be noted that this right, as it is enshrined within the CFREU, does not give further competences to the Union, but sets obligations for Member states to act under the EU's law. Thus, Member States must guarantee this fundamental right, but the EU is not responsible of materialising that access to education, as it is not within its prerogatives. According to case-law, this right applies exclusively to a transnational context (Gravier v. City of Liège, Case 293/83). That is, right to equal access to education under this article might be claimed once a national of a given Member state has moved to a different one (EU Network of Independent Experts on Fundamental Rights, 2006).

Furthermore, both Article 9 of the TFEU and 14 of the CFREU are used as legal basis to justify many initiatives carried by the EU in the field of higher education (the Bologna Process, the EEA, the Erasmus programme…). Thus, it can be understood that the scope of the right to education does cover higher, non-compulsory levels, such as vocational or higher education.[8]

To add more, in the explanations relating to the Charter of Fundamental Rights by the Praesidium of the European Convention (2003) it is established that Article 14 of the CFREU was tailored to include vocational and continued training (2007/C 303/02). While this document is not legally binding, it is a valuable and widely recognized tool to guide decision-makers in the interpretation of the CFREU (2007/C 303/02). Even though article 14 of the CFREU was based on the common constitutional traditions of Member States and on Article 2 of the Protocol to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR, hereinafter), it was extended to include both these spheres. However, it does not prevent these forms of education to have a cost, as long as the State takes measures to grant financial compensation. Only compulsory education needs to be free according to Article 14 of the CFREU.

Building on the fact that the CFREU is based on and expands the scope of Article 2 of the Protocol to the ECHR, case-law concerning the right to education under the ECHR can serve as a further tool to better narrow the understanding of the scope of Article 14 CFREU. And the ECHR has found that this right does in fact cover all levels of education, including higher education (Leyla Şahinv. Turkey [GC], 2005, para 141; Mürse lErenv. Turkey, 2006, para 41). Therefore, when creating institutions providing Higher Education, States must ensure that they are both affordable (but not necessarily free) and that there exists an effective right of access to them without discrimination (Leyla Şahin v. Turkey [GC], 2005, paras 136-137).

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[8] *Higher education* (EP, Fact Sheets on the EU)

Finally, while non-binding, the European Pillar of Social Rights influences the EU's political direction and strategies. The first pillar, which concerns education, training and life-long learning, establishes that:

> Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.

There is an explicit expression of not only the right to education, but also entitles the EU to pursue the goal of ensuring access and inclusiveness in education, training and learning. Again, this right to education can be argued to cover all levels, as it refers to "life-long" training, depending on the interpretation. Furthermore, many of the initiatives under this priority focus on higher education such as the EEA and the European Skills Agenda (among others).

Additionally, as highlighted by the EC's communication (2024), the format in which the European degree is foreseen, it would fully respect the autonomy of institutions and the competences of Member states. Firstly, because it is not delivered by the EU, but jointly by national, regional or institutional authorities, on a voluntary basis, maintaining authorities at the domestic level, not supranationally.

Secondly, Member states retain the freedom to choose in which way they would interact with this new initiative. Two options are put forward: either by directly creating a joint degree in collaboration with other institutions; or using a label, indicating that, even though the joint degree is not fully within the European degree framework, the criteria needed for the latter has been met.

Thirdly, the creation of a European degree policy lab through which the common criteria to be shared by these degrees will be established. This policy lab, in concept, is highly intergovernmental, as it will include Member states and higher education stakeholders (rooted at the national level). This would ensure that countries maintain their sovereignty in the field of education and the definition of the direction of an eventual European degree.

Finally, the project responds to an objective previously identified by Member states: to promote automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad.[9]

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[9] Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad

2.4.   The European degree in detail: innovative characteristics

The European degree blueprint is fairly similar to the concept of joint degrees, yet, fundamentally different in three key aspects.

Firstly, it will be automatically recognised across the EU. This is both innovative and revolutionary. Automatic recognition of academic diplomas in the EU does not exist at the academic level.[10] Currently, students lack information and certainty about whether their skills and qualifications will be accepted in different Member states, and the recognition depends on national or regional authorities. A national procedure needs to be undertaken. While diverse tools exist to allow for a more standardised process (European Qualification Framework, Diploma Supplement, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, etc), it is not legally specified nor always complied with. Past attempts have aimed to fulfil this goal, such as the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Recognition Convention, without success.

On the first case, efforts to harmonise higher education across the EU have been quite limited, with the Bologna Process and the EHEA as the main initiatives (Thompson, 2011). It can be argued that the impact of the Bologna process in creating a common education framework at the EU level has been restricted due to two factors: first, the process is fundamentally inter-governmental, with little space for supranational perspectives; secondly, decisions are non-binding, allowing for disparities among signatories depending on their priorities and capacities (Corbett, 2006).

It must be acknowledged that relevant progress has been made on the aspects of developing the credit system, the division into two main cycles (undergraduate and graduate), and to some extent, the comparability between degrees through the implementation of credits. Nevertheless, as highlighted by the latest report on the EHEA,[11] mobility and portability support for students are still far from the pre-established objectives. Thus, the Bologna process cannot be labelled fully as a success nor a failure. What is clear, is that higher education is increasingly adopting a pivotal role in post-industrial societies as the knowledge-economy consolidates, and the EHEA is not moving things fast enough; more cooperation and integration are needed (Gaebel & Zhang, 2018).

On the second case, the "Lisbon Recognition Convention" of 1997 was only ratified by all Member states on the 13th of September of 2024. Therefore, the Convention entered fully into force within all EU members only in November of 2024. Thus, it is too early to ascertain whether the Convention is a sufficient mechanism for the efficient recognition of qualifications. However, finally obtaining the ratification of all Member states showcases a positive inclination towards the advancement of this goal. The identification of this political will is supported by the recent recommendation

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[10]. European Youth Portal (7/9/2021). *The recognition of higher education degrees in Europe*.
[11] EACEA (2024). *The European higher education area in 2024*

of the Council to apply this framework to advance towards the mutual recognition of qualifications between Member states by 2025. However, while countries have made a political commitment to strive towards this goal, the implementation of Council recommendations is not-binding. Thus, at the factual level, application of these standards is not assured.

Secondly, the degree would be based on a set of common European criteria, their foundations laying on the same values, goals and rationale. This will allow to further enhance European identity and foster social cohesion. Again, previous initiatives aiming to increase cooperation among HEIs have missed this element. For instance, the Erasmus Mundus scheme does require following the Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA. Nevertheless, the European degree would take a step further and aims to integrate within its common criteria the goals within the European Strategy for Universities.[12]

Thirdly, the European degree would integrate within its structure the pursuit of policy goals of the EU, such as the acceleration of the twin transitions, including a prominent digital sphere in the degree. Furthermore, including new relevant skills that can prepare students as global citizens of the future. Therefore, with this goal in mind, several compulsory requirements for students are to be included within the academic curriculum of the degree (Burneikaitė et al., 2021). Firstly, compulsory physical transnational mobilities would be integrated within the framework of the degree, of at least 30 ECTS. Secondly, content should be in line, to a certain extent, with the EU's political and strategic priorities, aiming to provide students with interdisciplinary and intersectoral skills that foster innovation. Thirdly, multilingualism would be a key feature of the degree, and during the program students should be exposed to at least two different EU official languages, excluding language classes. For instance, dissertations are to be co-evaluated by at least two different professors from two different countries, thus requiring certain language flexibility by both students and professors.

The following table offers a synthesised overview of the existing options, highlighting the innovative aspects a European degree would imply:

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[12] Communication (…) on a European strategy for universities / COM(2022) 16 final

Figure 1. Comparative table between ordinary degree, ordinary joint degrees, Erasmus Mundus joint degrees and the European Degree

Distinctive elements	Ordinary (national) degrees	Ordinary joint programmes	Erasmus Mundus Joint Programmes	European Degree
Automatic recognition from involved universities	▬	✗	✓	✓
Automatic EU-Wide recognition	✗	✗	✗	✓
Common quality standards rooted on European values	✗	✗	✓	✓
Integration of EU strategic priorities	✗	✗	✗	✓

Source: by author, information retrieved from Burneikaitė et al., 2021.

3.   THE EUROPEAN DEGREE: THE CREATION OF A DANGEROUS DOUBLE-STANDARD, OR AN ACTUAL HARMONISING FORCE?

3.1.   The case for the materialisation of inclusivity: a *sine qua non*

As aforementioned, due to the recent announcement of the European degree project, few official documents are in circulation, the most relevant being: the official communication by the EC to other institutions, and the final report commissioned by DG EAC (Education, Youth, Sport and Culture). In both these documents, the word "inclusion" (and its variables such as inclusive, inclusiveness, inclusivity) understood as the contraposition to "discriminatory" or "exclusive", is mentioned a total of 39 times.

There is an acknowledgement concerning the inclusion of people with disabilities, offering the possibility of conducting international activities through digital tools. Furthermore, discrimination on any of the grounds mentioned in the CFREU remains completely prohibited during the enrolment process as well as during the studies. Nevertheless, there are no mentions on how discriminations on the grounds of social origin, understood in terms of the class into which an individual is born are to be avoided.[13]

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[13] Council of Europe. *Tackling discrimination based on social origin Report1 Committee on Equality and Non-Discriminatio* (2022).

As much as this word is used in both texts, concretion on how this inclusiveness is supposed to be materialised within the framework of the European degree is inexistent. The EC is not foreseeing, for the time being, the creation of any support scheme to ensure inclusivity and the representation of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. While digital adaptations are envisaged for students with disabilities, this is as far as the word inclusivity goes in terms of the European degree blueprint (Interview I, June 10, 2024).

The European degree would present a unique, enriching and fulfilling opportunity for students, who have expressed their agreement to the creation of such project (Burneikaitė et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the continued statement of how much this degree would benefit students and enhance their academic and professional skills, begs the question: which students? In line with its transnational nature, the degree requires a series of compulsory transnational mobilities. As positive as transnational education might be at the individual level, it remains a privilege: moving abroad represents high costs economically and at the personal level (López-Duarte et al., 2021).

From an economic perspective, moving countries costs money. Even the Erasmus programme, the world's leading and biggest student exchange scheme, is marked by social divide. Studies show that, even though the programme offers financial support (to some extent) to encourage student transnational mobility, only students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds eventually make use of it (Ballatore & Ferede, 2013): 55 % of European students do not consider studying abroad, even with the existence of the Erasmus programme, as it is too costly (Vossensteyn et al., 2010). This is due to the fact that grants offered for international student mobility do not meet the needs of the majority of students.

Thus, even with the existence of successful programmes such as Erasmus, social selectivity is perpetuated (Findlay, 2011). Circa 46 % of European students declare the Erasmus grants to be insufficient, thus, limiting their ability to pursue an international mobility (Vossensteyn et al., 2010).

Currently, only 8,8 % of Europeans pursue an international mobility during their studies, which is far from the pre-established goal of 20 %.[14] Furthermore, students less likely to participate in mobilities are those with a disability or coming from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.[15] This is also supported by data published by Eurostudent, in which European students voiced that one of the main barriers to international mobility is the financial aspect.[16]

Furthermore, the second most common obstacle discouraging students from pursuing international mobility is language. Many do not have the sufficient fluency in

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[14] EACEA (2024). *The European higher education area in 2024: Bologna process implementation report.*
[15] EACEA (2024). *Ibidem*
[16] Eurostudent.eu. *Obstacles to temporary enrolment abroad*

more than one or two languages.[17] There is a huge bias in the decision to move and where, which is affected by language: students will prioritise locations where English is the main language or places where there exists a language proximity with their mother tongue (Ovchinnikova et al., 2022). This precedence of language in decision-making is arguably affected by the fact that international student mobility programmes do not normatively include support schemes to learn the language of the host country upon arrival. The Online Language Support[18] platform developed within the framework of Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps provides a first step towards the creation of a more comprehensive support system which also includes universities as key actors.

Luckily, student exchanges remain an option (something students can choose to or not to carry out during their higher education). Therefore, the social divide between those who can and cannot go abroad is partly mitigated, as it is not a compulsory requirement. Nevertheless, what would be the social implications for a degree to turn it into a compulsory criterion? No exchange, no graduation.

3.2.   Not only a matter of money: behaviours, attitudes and social capital

Presenting a new framework for international student mobility without re-thinking the issues present in the current one, is to assimilate and reproduce existing inequalities. While the economic argument is particularly strong, other factors must be considered. For instance, people coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are generally not used to travel. Data from the Eurobarometer revealed that in 2018, on an average, 37 % of the EU's population had never been abroad.[19] This creates a cognitive barrier that is not experienced by individuals having had the chance to go abroad since childhood (on holidays, for example), adopting linguistic, multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary skills. How can we expect students, who have never been outside their country, to feel confident to study a degree that will require them to move abroad, at least for a period of 6 months? (Interview I, June 10, 2024). Especially considering the lack of financial support or academic guidance. It appears rather unrealistic.

Furthermore, at the behavioural level, other factors need to be accounted for. It has been found that students from underprivileged backgrounds not only are limited in their material resources to conduct transnational mobilities, but also in terms of attitudes. Many times, these students are not granted scholarships nor participation in these programmes because they do not even apply (Granato & Schnepf, 2024). Lack of information concerning the processes and requirements lead students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to shy away from the application; either because they see

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[17] Eurostudent.eu. *Ibidem*.
[18] https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/online-language-support
[19] Flash Eurobarometer 414: Preferences of Europeans towards tourism

themselves as unable to carry out the whole bureaucratic process (which is a challenge in itself), or they believe they do not even stand a chance in comparison to their more privileged peers.

Furthermore, a lack of close examples of relatives or acquaintances with international experience contributes to the mythification of these practices, portraying them as distant, inaccessible and abstract (Beech, 2014). This results in a self-fulfilling prophecy, similar to dynamics described by Bourdieu in his theorising of social capital: believing one does not have the possibility to engage in international mobility results in an automatic deprivation of this experience (Granato & Schnepf, 2024).

3.3.   Current trends and potential implications for the European Degree

While it is impossible to extract conclusions of a situation that has not yet taken place, hypothesis can be made. Some dynamics can be foreseen, when considering the data and arguments presented above. The blueprint represents an ambitious advancement in the harmonisation of education in the Union, as well as a remarkable framework for cooperation and further integration. However, some aspects require further attention.

The European degree, in its current form, has the potential to become an exclusive academic programme that rests upon previously existing structural inequalities; reinforcing, materialising and promoting them through its very existence. The problem, nevertheless, goes farther than that. It is likely that a heavy social selection marks access to the European degree, but that it goes unnoticed.

As research shows, students from lower social classes would not even apply to this programme, well aware of their incapacity to fulfil the degree's requirements. Therefore, not even allowing themselves the possibility to struggle or failing to graduate (Granato & Schnepf, 2024). Thus, students pursuing the European degree would be already filtered by the impossibility to know several languages fluidly without any kind of support within the programme, or the inability to move abroad for at least a semester with no flexibility in terms of mobility options.

This could arguably result in programmes where demographics are already distinctive: potentially hosting higher-class students with enough income to afford a transnational mobility, compulsory or not. In consequence, the problem would remain but hidden by an invisibility cloak of sorts: no body, no crime; no student fails to graduate due to economically excessive requirements, no barriers in terms of class exist. At least, not within the degree, but before: in the application process.

Therefore, the European degree blueprint can be framed as a double-edged sword. Either it becomes a paradigm for cooperation and harmonisation in higher education, re-shaping the European educational landscape and re-asserting the EU's global position as a leading academic and innovation centre. Or it becomes another metaphorical brick on the construction of the class ceiling.

3.4.   Striving for a truly "European" degree

Far from being solely a question of social justice, reading the current blueprint for the European degree, and considering the previous sections, a further preoccupying aspect arises. To what extent does the project honour the founding values and principles of the EU, as mentioned in Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU)?

Firstly, equality, in terms of treatment among individuals. As presented above, the European degree proposes a set of requirements that are materially unattainable for the majority of the population. As aforementioned, international student mobility is strictly limited by financial constraints.[20] However, this material reality shared by many European citizens is not acknowledged. In fact, the blueprint does not foresee to integrate any type of support system to ensure that students from all backgrounds can even consider studying the European degree.

It could be argued that, while the degree is not unequal (as enrolment would be open to any candidate, who would be judged fairly and equally), it does build on, reproduce and promote existing inequalities. It creates a dangerous double-standard: those students that can, and those who cannot pursue a European degree. Especially, with no intention to alleviate this differentiation nor even acknowledge it. Failing to integrate effective mechanisms that can identify factors restricting students from pursuing the degree (financial burden, lack of guidance or a supportive environment, linguistic barriers) and mitigate them, is to allow them to continue exercising their role as social filters. And ultimately, generate further inequalities within the student community.

Secondly, non-discrimination. Article 2 establishes that societies of Member states should strive towards non-discrimination. Furthermore, in the CFREU, it is prohibited against several grounds, including social origin, understood as: the social (class) background into which a person was born and/or that shaped their formative years (Sayek Böke, 2020). Which may include, but not only, socioeconomic background. Considering the previous findings on access to international mobility and languages, it could be argued that the European degree would be potentially discriminating in terms of social origin. While no express discrimination is imposed as an entrance criterion, the programme's requirements (without envisioning any type of additional support framework) will potentially act if not as deterrents, as effective barriers for students from lower social classes. Not only concerning material impossibilities, but also due to the absolute lack of consideration of the attitudes and social capital needed to navigate the compulsory requirements for the European degree.

Failing to acknowledge how graduation criteria are potentially discriminating towards students from lower social classes, and not creating a support system that ensures an effective equal access (not only in theory), results in a *de facto*

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[20] Eurostudent. *Ibidem*.

discrimination. The possibilities of students from certain social classes of participating in this programme are effectively restricted, and no actions are taken to counteract this fact.

To add more, Article 9 of the TFEU specifies that (text highlighted in bold by author):

> In **defining** and **implementing its policies** and **activities**, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the **fight against social exclusion**, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health.

It could be established that by implementing a European degree that builds on, materialises and reinforces inherent inequalities between students depending on their social origin, there exists a lack of consideration of the fight against social exclusion. The project in its current form would potentially accentuate and reproduce the very patterns that foster social exclusion in European societies. Key drivers are work status and inability to access employment.[21] The labour market has changed greatly in recent years due to, among others, the transition towards the knowledge economy and increased globalisation. As highlighted in the European degree's official communication, it is one of the aims of the project to train the new generation of workers, adapted to a transnational work environment and adopting emerging (and necessary) skills. By allowing only a small portion of the population to embody this new generation of Europeans, transnational, multilingual and adapted to the needs of the 21st century, would there not exist a high risk of creating first-class and second-class workers, more vulnerable to social exclusion?

Currently, the labour market is already highly fragmented. An individual's social origin determines greatly their professional opportunities in the future, due to education, connections, social capital, etc. However, great progress has been achieved in Europe in terms of access to education. Since 2012, there has been a steady increase in enrolment in lower-secondary education, as well as steady participation in early childhood education.[22][23] Furthermore, in 2023, more than 40 % of people between 25 and 34 had completed tertiary education.[24] What could be the consequences of creating yet, another social divide in higher education? Those who are prepared to deal with the challenges of this century, better oriented towards the globalised world and with enough resources to navigate multi-cultural settings. And those who could not afford that type of training. By fostering an exclusive educative model that separates students

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[21] Eurostat. *Living conditions in Europe - poverty and social exclusion* (2024)
[22] Eurostat. *Pupils enrolled in early childhood education by sex, type of institution and intensity of participation.* (Updated: 12.12.2024).
[23] Eurostat. *Pupils enrolled in lower-secondary education by programme orientation, sex, type of institution and intensity of participation* (Updated: 11.12.2024).
[24] Eurostat *Educational attainment statistics* (Data extracted: May 2024).

by social class, would not the European degree indirectly limit the professional perspectives of a great part of the population?

Learning languages is a luxury at the hands of those who can pay for it, and international mobility, a distinctive privilege. Creating a European degree that builds on both those requirements without acknowledging how inaccessible they are, is a project that caters to a reduced audience. And what is even more concerning: aiming to revolutionise the European education model by mainstreaming these standards would annihilate equality of opportunity, strengthen the class ceiling and stop social mobility on its tracks (losing the considerable progress that has been reached in the last decades). A European Degree that fails to acknowledge its role in materialising and promoting inequalities (by missing to hold accountability through support and inclusivity measures), implicitly shifts responsibilities towards individuals: masking the impossibility to study this programme as an individual choice, and not a product of the accumulation of several social filters carefully combined.

4.   RE-THINKING THE EUROPEAN DEGREE

The aim of this article is not to advocate against the European degree as a concept, but to reflect upon its structure and provide an insight on its potential feeble points. The current framework is ambitious and innovative. But as the title of the project indicates "European degree blueprint", it is a work in progress. Nothing is set in stone. Therefore, in order to bring this proposal from "ambitious" to "revolutionary", a series of proposals are put forward, aiming to mitigate the possible risks of social selection identified in this article. Flexibility does not imply pursuing a less ambitious project. Equality of opportunity is not about lowering the bar, but about finding the way to ensure everybody can climb the ladder regardless their starting point.

4.1.   Language support system

Learning several languages and having the fluency to follow a university level course in more than one of them is a skill marked by class (Block, 2017). Multilingualism needs to be enshrined within the European degree, as it is fully in line with the European project and a richness to be pursued. However, accommodations need to be made for it to become a plus, instead of a social filter; a flexibility that allows for the use and development of multiple languages (including minoritarian ones) while opening the programme for a wider range of the population.

Inclusivity in this aspect could be manifested through simple solutions, such as offering free language support courses for all enrolled students in the programme. If the university's resources were to be strictly limited, the Online Language Support system can be amplified to integrate students joining the European degree programme.

It would consist in a series of standardised online courses for several languages in different levels to be distributed to all programme participants.

Furthermore, enabling flexibility in language use could also contribute to widening accessibility without missing the point of the multilanguage policy. For instance, allowing students following a course in a foreign language, but delivering assignments and conducting exams in another official EU language (in English, for example). This would allow for a middle ground in which students could increase their linguistic competences, without being completely restricted from following a given programme.

However, it must be acknowledged that requiring teachers to be fluent in *circa* three languages is a cost for universities (in terms of human resources and hiring practices) and poses a barrier for several professionals who are not necessarily fluent in multiple languages. For that reason, it would be key to use the "Teacher Academy" platform co-funded through the Erasmus+ programme.[25] The initiative recognises the importance of teachers as active assets for the development of the EEA.[26] Thus, investing in building their capacities by offering an international outlook to teaching, innovative practices and tools to deal with new realities becomes a priority. Therefore, these communities fostered through Erasmus+ could be used to train teachers interested in integrating the European degree programme, allowing universities to provide their professors with the necessary training to carry out the extra commitments (language skills acquisition) required for the degree.

4.2. Assistance through the application procedure

In most cases, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not participate in international student mobility because they do not even apply for it, nor the existing scholarships and, therefore, fail to be integrated in these schemes (Granato & Schnepf, 2024). Thus, it would be relevant to ensure that: first, information reaches effectively a representative part of the student population, as to ensure everybody is aware of the offered opportunities (in a dedicated platform, for instance); second, availability of detailed and clear instructions to conduct the application procedure. Availability and access to information are not synonyms: even if the knowledge is out there, on a public basis, knowing what to look for and how to do it is already a privilege.

Thus, it would be encouraged to pursue an exhaustive communication campaign at several levels: supranational, national, regional and local. This would be directed by the EU but pursuing multi-level cooperation between different governmental levels. Not only gathering all the information in a single platform to allow for easier navigation (adapted to different territorial realities, and to be updated by local authorities), but

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[25] Erasmus+ Programme Guide: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-programme-guide
[26] Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future 2020/C 193/04.

also ensuring that the platform is popularised. Communication would be mainly through institutions pursuing the European degree, that would present the platform and diverse information to prospective students. Communication-related costs are already foreseen within the EC's report concerning the European degree, and thus, promoting the platform would arguably fall within this spending category (Burneikaitė et al., 2021).

Furthermore, universities participating in the European degree scheme should habilitate aid services or help points through which students could get effective assistance on conducting bureaucratic requirements, scholarship requests and general logistical information to navigate successfully their studies. Additionally, a support mechanism in terms of mentoring and coaching should be integrated within the programme's framework, allowing students to express their concerns, find solutions to individual situations and have guidance in navigating the complexities of the European degree at a more humane level (counselling, for instance), not a purely administrative support for bureaucratic procedures.

4.3.   Exchanges, in the traditional sense

International student mobility is a huge economic investment, and therefore, not accessible for a majority of the student population. Nevertheless, considering the high level of coordination that would be needed between institutions sharing a European degree (as enhancing cooperation between HEIs is also one of the goals of the project), it would be possible to develop a network of families interested in joining these schemes. Instead of imposing a semester long international mobility, the programme could integrate some degree of flexibility and allow for short-term exchanges in the old-fashioned way. "Student A" hosts "Student B" in their home country for a fixed period of time and later on in the academic year, "Student B" hosts "Student A" for a similar period of time. These networks already exist, and international exchanges between high schoolers along with their participating families are already a reality through the Erasmus+ Programme. In this way, jointly with existing Erasmus+ financial aids to ensure families can host an extra student, the economic burden for students could be reduced, while also allowing for international mobility. This would not substitute the initially proposed long-term mobility, but would remain as another valid option, with which a wider set of students would be able to access.

It would be important that these networks were integrated and organised within the very European degree project, as coordination of such complex schemes could overwhelm administrations from smaller universities, resulting in an option that should exist in paper, but it is not very effective. It would be key to ensure a centralised overview of the functioning of this system, as it would be a key element in ensuring a fairer and more inclusive access to the European degree programme.

4.4.   Integrating a social criterion to all scholarships

While no specific funds will be destined to the materialisation of a financial inclusion scheme within the programme, the project relies on universities and countries participating in the European Degrees to create scholarships on their own (Interview I, June 10, 2024). Oftentimes, scholarships to pursue transnational higher education are granted on a meritocratic basis. However, several scholars have already pointed out how "merit" is closely linked to a privileged social background. Merit-based systems (such as excellence scholarships to pursue elite educative programmes) end up rewarding already privileged students (Charles et al., 2020).

For instance, requirements regulating granting of merit-based scholarships often fail to acknowledge many different realities. For example, students in rural settings have less access to extracurricular activities, due to lack of transport or availability (Raleigh, 2022); students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often need to work part-time while conducting their studies, leaving less time for volunteering and extra curriculars (Ariño et al., 2022); and students with better resources have access to private tutoring, which enables, on the one hand, having higher grades on an average, and on the other hand, to better prepare applications through individual guidance (Kenway, 2014). These are only the most notable factors regulating granting of merit scholarships, but each scheme has its own particular requirements, and each scheme generates different types of challenges for diverse profiles.

Furthermore, the concept of meritocracy has already been harshly criticised by Sandel (2020), who points out its implications for social cohesion. In his words, "those who land on top want to believe their success is morally justified" (Sandel, 2020, p.13). Justified through hard work and discipline. And while those attributes are not eliminated by the sheer social class of an individual, it must be acknowledged that meritocratic societies tend to obscure the underlying mechanisms that helped and assisted them (that does not mean gifted or granted) to achieve a comfortable position in society.

Thus, if a framework enabling access to the European degree was to be created, it should consider these factors in order to be truly equal and inclusive. Scholarships developed within the European Degree framework should integrate, on a normative basis, a social criterion for attribution. While excellence and merits can (and should) be considered, a social component needs to be added to ensure a truly inclusive access, and for these scholarships to actually contribute to equality of opportunity, and not reproduce existing hierarchies.

5.   CONCLUDING REMARKS

The European degree blueprint is a project that complements and advances many ongoing strategies: the Bologna process, the EEA, and broadens the scope of the Erasmus programme. It is ambitious, innovative, and gives responses to multiple issues: both concrete to the field of education (the need for more cooperation between HEIs, a better recognition of acquired competences) and EU-wide challenges (such as globalisation, the ongoing transition towards the knowledge economy and the restructuring of the international arena). While there exists a potential to advance European integration and bridge the existing gaps, if existing structural inequalities are not acknowledged and addressed, there is a risk to engrave these underlying issues even further, and provoking stark negative externalities on social cohesion, equality and inclusiveness in the field of education.

Thus, considering that for now, the European degree blueprint is, in its current state, fundamentally exclusive. The programme requires potential students to have an amount of economic, social and personal resources that are simply out of reach for a great majority of Europeans. Not only this poses an evident impeachment in ensuring equal access to the programme, but these filters (because it is how they act, in practice, as social filters) remain unacknowledged. The problematic is easy to miss, as it does not explicitly create new barriers, but builds on the already existing ones: social selectivity of international student mobility programmes, the link between class and language learning, and access to information in relation to social origin. Therefore, failing to recognise how the European degree interacts with these mechanisms and activates them, is to unintentionally perpetuate and accept them.

Thus, considering that for now, the European degree is still a blueprint, this is the moment to spark this reflection and critically assess to what extent the current format addresses these issues and how the programme can better mitigate those mechanisms. For that reason, this article includes a series of proposals that would contribute to bringing flexibility to the programme, allowing for a wider audience to follow it, without eliminating the core and relevant elements that define the European degree, namely: multilingualism and transnationality.

Education as a right and a priority is enshrined in the EU's DNA (through the European Pillar of Social Rights, explicitly in the CFREU, and in several mentions through the Treaties) even if competences in this field are scarce. However, education needs to be understood not only as the concept, but also in the context of its instrumentalization. Education is still, nowadays, one of the best tools to combat socioeconomic inequalities and strive towards equality (a core value within the EU, as enshrined in Article 2 of the TEU). Thus, when shaping the future of the educative field, policy-makers need be aware of the multiple strands they are potentially influencing at the same time. Carrying out education policies is to repercuss: social mobility, equality of opportunity, social justice and generational cycles of poverty. Therefore, an

education policy that fails to acknowledge its role on reinforcing and reproducing structural inequalities, is not only a missed opportunity, but also contradictory to its very goals.

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6.3.   Jurisprudence

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6.4.   List of Interviews

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