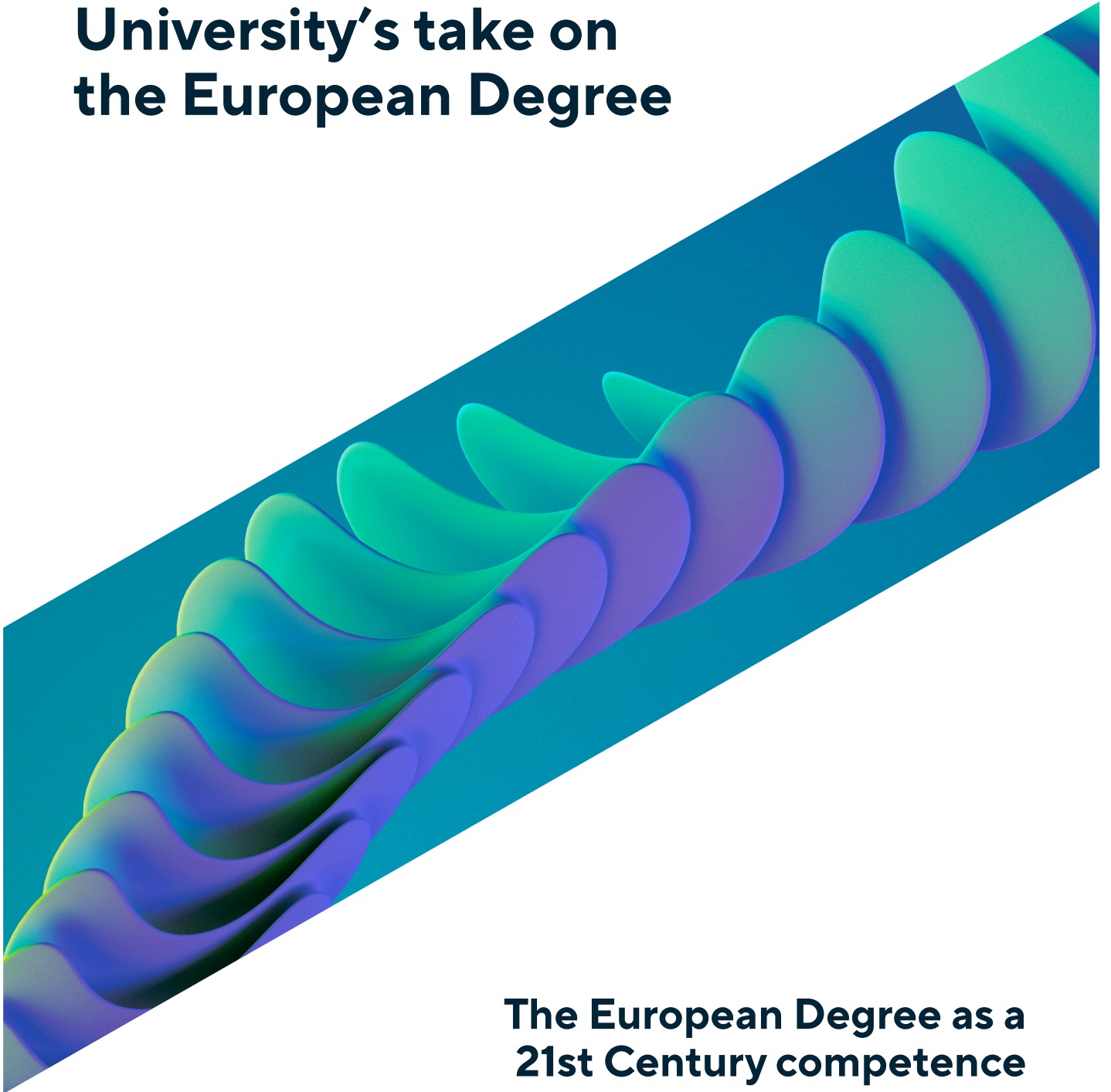# Flexible learning paths – ECIU University's take on the European Degree

The European Degree as a 21st Century competence passport extending lifelong learning through micro-credentials

Need for systemic change

Societal challenges and rapid digital transformation boost the need for continuous skills and competence development of citizens and drive higher education to fundamentally transform. In order for universities to stand at the forefront of tackling global issues and leading the discourse for societal development, they must also be capable of reflecting the evolving societal needs in the learning environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically increased the pace of change in learning processes. These changes have a significant impact, especially regarding digitalisation, pedagogy, equal access to digital technology, inclusion, funding for learners and workers, and mobility, amongst others. The response to the pandemic presents an opportunity to take advantage of the disruption to traditional learning pathways and adopt greater learning flexibility enabled by digital technologies.

> An increasing number of learners are looking for innovative flexible learning pathways that meet their interdisciplinary needs, their interests and that are also accessible from anywhere at any time. At ECIU University, we believe that the future belongs to people with a growth mindset who continuously update their academic knowledge, skills and competences. The needs of lifelong learners and society call for systemic change. New requirements for agility, flexibility, personalisation and digital transformation are rapidly emerging. European higher education has the responsibility to respond to this challenge collectively, ensuring that everyone benefits from the new digital society. In doing so, the European Universities can lead the discourse shaping the relationship between higher education institutions and wider society. This is an opportunity where universities have the flexibility to reflect and adapt to changing societal conditions while shaping societies by tackling large challenges.

For ECIU University, the introduction of the European Degree is an excellent opportunity to support the transformation of European higher education from a one-for-all education towards agile and personalised learning paths for life. Instead of replicating current national degree education models at the European level, we can use the European Degree as a novel vehicle to ensure flexible and personalised future-proof learning across Europe for learners to develop personally and professionally, in order to be engaged, forward-thinking and critical citizens. At ECIU University, we believe that the micro-credentials movement is a powerful disruptive force and key change lever to achieve this transformative agenda, as stated by our vision 2030 [1] and micro-credentials white paper.[2]

---

1 https://www.eciu.org/news/eciu-university-2030-connects-u-for-life
2 https://www.eciu.org/news/paving-the-road-for-the-micro-credentials-movement

European Degree – redefining flexibility in education

ECIU University believes that European higher education's future lies in an ecosystem not bound by national borders, but instead based upon open and inclusive collaboration connecting societal stakeholders, researchers, and learners to provide answers to future societal challenges. Within this ecosystem, universities' role will be creating a platform for solving multi-disciplinary challenges in entrepreneurial, innovative ways and providing personalised learning and career opportunities for life at the European level. This will be enabled by a novel university model based upon co-creation. To achieve this, ECIU University proposes creating the European Degree as a new model that opens up learning, as opposed to the comparatively closed nature of regular degree programmes.

To explain our vision, we must first make the distinction between regular and joint-degrees and our proposed European Degree. The common approach sees regular and joint-degrees structured around courses pre-determined by the university (or several universities in the case of a joint-degree). Learners are given a limited choice with optional courses or sometimes branching specialisation pathways. However, even these options and pathways are set in advance. This means that the universities' programme managers know exactly what competences a learner is developing and what courses lie in their future - the degree's structure is known in its entirety. While standard degrees will remain in the domain of the ECIU member universities, Europe is in urgent need of more truly interdisciplinary degrees that offer a broader view, going beyond the well-known concept of joint-degrees.

ECIU University is open to all academic learners who have the right motivation and knowledge, allowing them to choose whatever micro-credential they like and build personalised pathways.

The essence of what ECIU proposes as the European Degree is not a 'degree' in the traditional sense. ECIU proposes a European competence passport, built upon individual and flexible learning pathways based entirely on the learners' choices and needs.

It represents what many may call a vision, as the challenges for such a degree are many and the pathway to success long. However, it is the view of ECIU that we can tackle these challenges, resulting in a European Degree that can radically change how higher education is understood and provided. It decentralises the concept of university programmes, focusing instead on courses and the skills they develop. It is entirely learner-centred and based on personalised pathways connected to relevant European challenges. As such, the European Degree does not represent a single programme. Rather, each European Degree will be unique, reflecting the skills attained by the learner through their choice and stored as stackable micro-credentials in the digital competence passport.

The digital competence passport will act as evidence of **micro-credentials** that learners have obtained over time, becoming the portfolio of academic knowledge, skills and competence acquired and chosen by the learner throughout our European offerings. It is a living document, as skills and competence develop over time. The digital competence passport provides transparent up-to-date information on a learner's skills and competences as they earn micro-credentials and records them in the competence passport. Our concept of a digital competence passport extends the existing structures and systems by emphasising the proof of the skills and competences acquired, a critical aspect of micro-credentials, as emphasised in the European approach. Therefore, a digital competence passport is always tied to the European Degree, combining tertiary education and lifelong learning credentials which are constantly updated.

> The European Degree and the digital competence passport will be connected to quality assurance at the European level. Our vision is for an agile quality assurance process that reduces administrative burdens at the individual Member States' level. To this end, ECIU University has set about developing a comprehensive ECIU University Learner Transformation Framework to support a sustainable micro-credentials movement in higher education across Europe. The framework will help to reimagine new standards for agility, flexibility and personalisation in higher education in the spirit of lifelong learning. By solving multi-disciplinary challenges together with different stakeholders of society or developing knowledge, skills, and competences through research-based micromodules and innovative pedagogies, learners are provided with micro-credentials transparently demonstrating their skills and competences.

To achieve this flexibility, the European Degree will be supported using **micro-credentials** as a means to pursue versatile learning outcomes and a competence passport to store the proof of the competences and skills the learner has achieved over time. The micro-credential acquisition is based on a stacking framework where each new learning outcome updates the learning pathway and informs new learning opportunities, aligned with the European and National Qualifications Frameworks. Micro-credentials redefine the types of awards and qualifications offered by universities, allowing greater flexibility in recognising skills, both formal and informal. It also creates a tangible way for societal stakeholders to be involved in the education process, as competences from them can inform the stacking framework, co-creating learning objectives and pathways. At the same time, the framework allows the tailoring of learning pathways that can create specialists that exactly match the needs of industry. By utilising micro-credentials, the European Degree has an opportunity to fundamentally change universities' role in transforming learning and are a promising means of aligning universities with societal perspectives and values.

However, we must point out that the European Degree is not just the micro-credentials and competence passport. Instead, these are the tools that enable the European Degree. The degree itself represents learner empowerment through choice and unprecedented collaboration in higher education. While the former has already been discussed, it is the essential role of collaboration that completes the vision for the European Degree.

We have discussed how the European Degree will be based on learners making constant choices from the courses being provided. These courses will represent the scale of collaborations as they will come from multiple universities in Europe, regardless of the learners' geographical location. We believe the future of European higher education institutions is no longer about universities offering one-for-all curricula but rather about learners defining their personalised, agile, and flexible lifelong learning pathways.

We welcome the discussions that are currently ongoing regarding the European Degree as it is an opportunity to fundamentally rethink and innovate education and to seriously reevaluate how we develop and recognise future skills and competences across Europe. The European Degree can result in an evolution of higher education, enabling flexible and personalised learning pathways, recognising the individual needs of each learner at the European level.

We are pioneering, stretching the system, testing something completely new across Europe. We will soon be ready to share our scenarios for learning pathways and our needs regarding quality assurance on European level. We look forward to working together with policy-makers and stakeholders in realising the potential of a European Degree based upon flexible lifelong learning pathways and a competence passport.

13 PIONEERS

University of Twente (The Netherlands)

Aalborg University (Denmark)

Dublin City University (Ireland)

Hamburg University of Technology (Germany)

Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania)

Linkoping University (Sweden)

Tampere University (Finland)

Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona (Spain)

University of Aveiro (Portugal)

University of Stavanger (Norway)

University of Trento (Italy)

Institut National des Sciences Appliquees (France)

TEC de Monterrey, associated partner

32 ASSOCIATES

1 NATIONAL AUTHORITY

6 REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

8 CITIES

13 ENTERPRISES

2 ASSOCIATIONS

2 AGENCIES

UNITING OVER...

489	**147**
RESEARCH GROUPS	FACULTIES
46,688	**298,000**
STAFF, INCLUDING	STUDENTS
27,182 ACADEMIC STAFF/RESEARCHERS	

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union