

Challenging innovation: a consideration of international joint degree programs for Australia

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INTRODUCTION

Building on recent moves towards integration in the European Higher Education Area, this paper analyses the opportunities offered to Australian tertiary institutions by the development and delivery of international joint degree programs.

The development of joint degree programs as a policy initiative derives from the broader context of the Bologna process, with Erasmus Mundus acting as the flagship program in Europe. A recent European University Association study refers to joint degrees as a "poorly understood but interesting development on the landscape of European higher education" (EUA 2004, p. 8).

The paper explores the rationale underpinning these developments within Europe and seeks to evaluate them within an Australian strategic and operational context. Having clarified definitional issues, the paper considers the benefits of – and obstacles to – the development and delivery of international joint degrees by Australian tertiary institutions and their overseas partners.

DEFINITIONS

Establishing a clear definition of what could and – more essentially – should constitute a joint degree program has been an ongoing task in Europe. Indeed, there has been some concern over the production of a single rigid blueprint for joint degrees (UK discussion paper 2004, p. 3).

Joint degrees

Building on the conclusions and recommendations of the May 2002 Seminar on Joint Degrees within the framework of the Bologna Process held in Stockholm, the following working definition was initially sketched (Rauhvargers 2003, p. 31):

Joint degrees are normally awarded after study programmes that correspond to all or at least some of the following characteristics:

- *The programmes are developed and/or approved jointly by several institutions;*
- *Students from each participating institution study parts of the programme at other institutions;*
- *The students' stays at the participating institutions are of comparable length;*
- *Periods of study and exams passed at the partner institution(s) are recognised fully and automatically;*
- *Professors of each participating institution also teach at the other institutions, work out the curriculum jointly and form joint commissions for admission and examinations;*
- *After completion of the full programme, the student either obtains the national degrees of each participating institution or a degree (in fact usually an unofficial "certificate" or "diploma") awarded jointly by them.*

With particular reference to the ways in which a joint degree might be issued, this definition was further refined by a joint Council of Europe/UNESCO committee on the recognition of higher education qualifications in June 2004¹.

In essence, the distinctive qualities of a joint degree program can be summarised as follows:

- Two or more participating institutions in two or more countries
- Joint curriculum development and joint program approval
- Collaboration in student selection and course delivery
- Staff mobility in curriculum development, student selection and/or course delivery
- Student mobility for substantial and continuous periods of time.

This paper will also argue that a defining characteristic of a joint degree should be the awarding of a single degree certificate/graduation document as the most accurate reflection of the nature of the joint program.

For the purposes of this paper, the type of European-style joint degree program described in this revised definition will be referred to as an “international joint degree” or “international joint degree program”.

Double degrees, combined degrees, dual degrees

According to the above definition, an international joint degree is essentially a unitary program. It is therefore easily distinguishable from a range of often similar qualifications which represent the collation of two separate degrees (see table below).

Appellation	Description	Characteristics
Combined degree [Australia]; Concurrent degrees (Coimbra Group 2003)	Two degrees studied concurrently at the same institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One institution only • No joint curriculum development • No mandatory student mobility • Recognised through two separate degree certificates
Double degree, double degree programme or double degree scheme (Coimbra Group 2003); Dual degree [UK]; Coordinated degree [Indiana University System, USA] (Leslie & Buck Sutton 2005)	Two degrees studied concurrently at two different institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two institutions + student mobility • Joint program approval but no joint curriculum development • Recognised through two separate degree certificates
Joint degree/double degree [Australia]; Consecutive degree (Coimbra Group 2003); Dual degree [UK]	Two degrees taken sequentially in two different institutions in two different countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two institutions + student mobility • No joint curriculum development • No joint program approval, but a certain level of mutually recognised credit transfer • No staff mobility • May lead to a single degree certificate (double-badged), but usually results in two separate certificates.

¹ Committee of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region: “A joint degree should (...) be understood as referring to a higher education qualification issued jointly by two or more higher education institutions or jointly by one or more higher education institutions and other awarding bodies, on the basis of a study programme developed and/or provided jointly by the higher education institutions, possibly also in cooperation with other institutions. A joint degree may be issued as a) a joint diploma in addition to one or more national diplomas, b) a joint diploma issued by the institutions offering the study programme in question without being accompanied by any national diploma, or c) one or more national diplomas issued officially as the only attestation of the joint qualification in question.”

Commonly referred to in the collective as double degrees, the qualifications described in the above table may also be referred to as joint degrees in certain contexts. However, as the various double, combined and dual degrees described do not correspond to the proposed characteristics of an international joint degree program as defined in this paper, an analysis of these types of 'joint degree' will not be included.

EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK

While international joint degree programs are being established across a number of countries and regions, it is in Europe where their development has been most pronounced.

This cannot be understood without reference to the Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). As noted in an EUA study, "joint degrees are seen as both potential catalyst and prototype for the European Higher Education Area" (EUA 2004, p. 8). They are referred to in both the Bologna Declaration and ensuing Communiqués as an important means to create the EHEA.

This section will therefore outline the broader European context – with some brief remarks on the Bologna Process and the European Union (EU) – before moving on to the Erasmus Mundus program.

Bologna Process

A history of the Bologna Process can appear at first hearing to be a roll-call of historic European cities and institutions: Sorbonne, Bologna, Prague, Berlin, Bergen.

A simple definition proposes that it is "the ongoing process of working towards the creation of a European Higher Education Area"². It has its origins in the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration, when four countries (Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom) called upon other European countries to join them in an effort to harmonise the architecture of the higher education systems in Europe³. In June 1999, 29 countries signed the Bologna Declaration, committed to creating a "coherent, compatible and competitive" European Higher Education Area by the year 2010. Three ensuing conferences – Prague (2001), Berlin (2003) and most recently Bergen (2005) – have led to the development and refinement of the Process. There are now 45 participating European countries – from Ireland to Russia⁴.

There is not space to elaborate on the overall objectives of the Bologna process here⁵: arguably, the introduction of the two-tier – 'three plus two' – Bachelors/Masters system has received most attention⁶. What is significant for this paper is that the Bologna Process provides a framework – and impetus – for the development of international joint degree programs **within Europe** (our emphasis).

² WENR, Bologna Glossary, <http://www.wes.org/ewenr/03sept/BolognaGlossary.htm>.

³ Some date it earlier, pointing to the 1988 *Magna Charta Universitatum* signed in Bologna by a group of University Rectors (see http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/880918_Magna_Charta_Universitatum.pdf)

⁴ For a list of participating countries, see http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/national_impl/05NAT_REP.HTM.

⁵ Bologna objectives include:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
- Adoption of a system based on two main cycles: undergraduate and graduate
- Establishment of a system of credits to promote widespread student mobility
- Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement of students, researchers, instructors and staff
- Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curriculum development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programs of study, training and research

⁶ As noted by Christian Tauch, the introduction of the Bachelor/Masters degree structure is seen – by many from non-EU countries – as "virtually synonymous" with the Bologna Process (Tauch 2005, p. 23).

The rationale is essentially two-fold:

- 1) international competitiveness in higher education⁷; and
- 2) European harmonisation – a regional political agenda⁸.

These factors are important to bear in mind when we consider an Australian rationale (or a rationale for Australian universities) to develop such programs.

While it is important to note that this is not an EU program as such, it dovetails into the EU's mission to promote European integration⁹. One sees repeated references in the various official pronouncements, and EU-sponsored seminars, on the promotion of the necessary European dimension in higher education, including joint degree programs¹⁰.

However, despite being high on the **political** agenda, Christian Tauch has referred to “unrealised potential” and judges that they have received relatively low priority at ministerial levels (Tauch 2005, p.27)¹¹. He noted that in 2003 national legislation meant that universities in some 50 per cent of European countries were not able to participate in joint degree programs¹². While there is undoubtedly a variety of constraints in play (operational, legislative), Tauch goes on to note, however, that the Erasmus Mundus program might provide valuable momentum to push this issue higher up the policy agenda.

Most recently, at the Bergen conference, ministers stated that by the time of the London summit in 2007 they would be looking for progress in *inter alia*:

- the awarding and recognition of joint degrees, including at the doctorate level (Bergen Communiqué 2005, p. 5)¹³

And so to Erasmus Mundus: the flagship program for joint degrees in Europe.

⁷ Recent publications on the international competitiveness of European higher education include Gehrlich, V. (2005) 'European higher education institutions at the eve of a new experience: competition tools and concepts of survival' and Teichler, U. (2005) 'Non-European students: the forgotten half of the Bologna-Process?' in Muche, F. (ed.) *Opening up to the Wider World: The External Dimension of the Bologna Process*, 93-103 & 111-120

⁸ It is also notable that the EU has acknowledged that additional work is needed on the external dimension of the EHEA – a point to be expanded on later (cf. Bergen Communiqué 2005).

⁹ As noted by Sedgwick and Clark (2003), the EU is one of the principal stakeholders in the establishment of a European Higher Education Area.

¹⁰ Refer, for example, to the 2002 Stockholm Conclusions (Ministry of Education and Science, Sweden 2002, p. 1): “joint degrees are important instruments for implementing the objectives set out in the Bologna Declaration and Prague Communiqué: promoting student and teacher mobility, employability, quality, the European dimension and the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA”. Education Ministers at the Prague Summit also called for the development of courses “offered in partnership by institutions from different countries and leading to a recognised joint degree” (Rauvargers 2002, p.27). See also the Final Report of ‘The Bologna Process: Seminar on Integrated curricula: - Implications and Prospects’, Mantova, April 2003 (available at http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Mantova_Results.pdf).

¹¹ This builds on the findings of Reichert and Tauch (2005) – noting that “the Trends III study of 2003 had revealed that the level of interest in Joint Degrees among rectors’ conferences and ministries was ‘medium to low’. Apparently this has changed for the better in most countries, perhaps due to the influence of the Erasmus Mundus programme. Interest levels increased and greater offering of Joint Degrees in the coming years seems likely. Nonetheless, despite the growing interest in Joint Degrees, there remains little available information about the number of existing programmes, with exact figures available only in a few countries, like France, Germany and Italy”.

¹² Rauvargers (2002, p.35) notes that the award of what he terms a ‘real joint degree’ (i.e. a single degree certificate in the name of both/all participating institutions) is feasible only in the UK and Italy. Since that time, France has introduced legislation to allow for joint badged degrees – see http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/France/050520_France_Joint_degrees.pdf. For national reports submitted at Bergen, outlining progress towards Bologna goals, see http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/national_impl/01NAT_IMP.HTM. Note in particular the response to item 11.1 on progress made in the establishment of joint degree programs, and the removal of legal obstacles. Some countries (such as the Netherlands) refer to new legislation planned to specifically allow for joint degrees; others (such as Denmark) make no mention.

¹³ This paper does not seek to map progress in the development of joint degree programs by European institutions. However, the EUA has recently launched an online interactive search tool to raise awareness of current Joint Masters programmes in Europe (see press release of 5 September 2005: http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/client/item_view.jsp?type_id=1&item_id=2580). This online catalogue is the first such resource available in Europe and the basic data provides information on each programme and the partners involved, as well as the contact details of the programme coordinator and relevant web links.

Erasmus Mundus

The Erasmus Mundus program (previously also referred to as Erasmus World) was set up by the EU in December 2003¹⁴. It is a cooperation and mobility program in higher education which aims to promote the EU as a 'centre of excellence', to support top-quality Masters Courses, and to enhance the visibility and attractiveness of European higher education in third countries¹⁵. The keywords are quality and mobility.

The chosen means to achieve this overall aim is the creation of European joint degree programs at the Masters level, with a substantial scholarship funding component. The cornerstone of the program (also referred to in European Commission-speak as Action 1) is a range of Erasmus Mundus (EM) Masters Courses offered by consortia of European universities – at least three universities from at least three different European countries – resulting in the award of a joint degree¹⁶.

EM Masters Courses are characterised as follows:

- they must be 'integrated'
 - a study period in at least two of the three/many universities
 - jointly developed curricula – or full recognition of courses delivered separately, but making up a common course
 - joint admission and examination criteria;
- they must lead to the award of a recognised double, multiple or joint degree;
- they may run from one to two years (60 - 120 ECTS¹⁷), and
- they may be in any discipline.

EM provides for some 230 million euros (around AUD\$ 365 million) over five years (2004-2008), supporting approximately 100 selected EM Masters Courses. It provides grants for graduate students from third countries to follow these Masters Courses, and for EU graduate students involved in these courses to study in third countries¹⁸.

The first set of EM courses which were selected – a total of 19 in 2004 – involve 92 universities from 17 countries. Many consortia involve multiple partners – many of them more than three¹⁹.

The EM web site also gives figures for third country scholars (including Australia). However this paper will not expand on the 'Fulbright' (scholarship) aspect of the program, but rather the rationale for the development of joint Masters courses themselves.

¹⁴ European Commission, *Erasmus Mundus Call for Proposals* (EAC/21/41). The overall aim, according to the Commission, is "to enhance the quality of European higher education by fostering co-operation with third countries in order to improve the development of human resources and to promote dialogue and understanding between people and cultures". Officially, the program rests on the mandate given to the European Commission (EC) by Article 149 of the Treaty, which allows the EC to foster cooperation with third countries to enhance quality education. However the programs appear to move beyond this initial aim, and they dovetail well into ongoing efforts to harmonise the European higher education space.

¹⁵ See European Commission web site at http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/mundus/index_en.html

¹⁶ Action 1 is open to universities in all EU countries, plus EFTA and the candidate countries (candidates' participation to be formalised) – so a sub-set only of the Bologna Process countries. The other action areas cover: 2) the award of EM scholarships to non-EU students and academics to undertake EM Masters courses; 3) encouraging partnerships with non-EU universities – notably for outward European mobility; 4) the promotion of European education globally – 'enhancing attractiveness'. See Hunter L./European Commission (2005), 'European "Fulbright" comes to Australia and NZ', *EU Review*, 2.

¹⁷ ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) – a common system for recognizing studies completed within Europe. The ECTS aims to promote the exchange of academic information among European institutions of higher education in order to facilitate student mobility.

¹⁸ Proposals to fund EM Masters Courses are assessed by two independent academic experts and reviewed by a Selection Board. The European Commission takes the final decision.

¹⁹ See http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/mundus/projects/index_en.html for a list of current EM courses. At September 2005, there are 36 on the list. Note that most result in the award of multiple degrees.

It is clear that in choosing to support this program, the EU/European Commission is not only promoting international cooperation – the Treaty-basis for its activity in this area – but also:

- the attractiveness/competitiveness of the European higher education area;
- harmonisation within the EHEA, and
- mobility within Europe.

All these are central to the Bologna Process.

So, how might the development of such courses – and the rationale underpinning their development – apply in Australia?

AUSTRALIAN RATIONALE

Inherent to the idea of a university is the exchange of information and ideas without respect for national boundaries. Globalisation in world affairs and the information technology revolution have made this exchange much easier, but have also highlighted the importance of international collaboration and internationalisation within higher education.

The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) has defined the internationalisation of higher education as “the complex of processes that gives universities an international dimension” (AVCC 1997). By this definition, internationalisation affects not only research and scholarly exchange, but it underpins all aspects of university life including teaching and learning, community service and institutional management.

Internationalisation is now high on the strategic agenda of most Australian institutions, encompassing a broad range of activities from international study experiences for students and staff to the internationalisation of the curriculum, and from international student recruitment to the provision of in-country development aid.

From a strategic perspective, there is evidently significant benefit for an Australian institution to develop an international joint degree program with a partner institution abroad. Not only do such programs provide an opportunity for mobility and for curriculum innovation, but they also enable and encourage constructive dialogue between academic staff over teaching practice and curriculum content.

This broader strategic rationale is clearly mirrored in the majority of the European objectives for joint degree programs. In brief, an international joint degree program is an ideal channel for promoting a deep and multi-faceted internationalisation within institutions, both within Europe and globally.

Australian policy

The desirability of international joint degree programs for Australia has been recognised through the introduction in 2002 of a pilot project scheme on higher education cooperation between Australia and the European Union²⁰.

This initial phase of Australia/EU education co-operation involved three pilot projects aimed at improving higher education co-operation, chiefly through staff and student mobility, but also through the development of mutually recognised credit transfer arrangements. The

²⁰ Further details available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/eu_others/australia/index_en.html For information, ongoing cooperation programmes between the EU and the United States and the EU and Canada have been in place since the 1990s and were renewed in 2000 (see http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/eu-usa/index_en.html and http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/eu-canada/index_en.html respectively).

Australian Government and the EU both committed approximately \$500,000 to each of the three pilot projects, which involved consortia of Australian and EU universities delivering joint coursework masters programmes giving students an opportunity to study abroad²¹. A fourth round of projects was announced in early September 2005²².

Australia is also one of the few non-European countries to have ratified the 1997 Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (commonly referred to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention). Its government and institutions have therefore engaged to recognise all European qualifications, including joint degrees²³.

However, although policy on international cooperation between Australia and Europe is in place, little progress has been made in direct relation to the development of joint degree programs either within or outside the framework of Erasmus Mundus.

This is nevertheless a policy initiative which Australia should seriously consider, despite what at first appear to be formidable challenges.

CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES

The focus of this paper is on the particular considerations and challenges for participation in international joint degrees by Australian institutions. However, a wide range of generic concerns has been identified and documented to date and these are equally applicable in the Australian context as in the European context. Following an overview of these generic concerns, the central questions and issues for Australia will be outlined below.

Generic considerations and challenges

The generic concerns facing all institutions in the development of international joint degrees can be classified into three main groups: academic concerns, operational concerns and resourcing concerns. Many of these were identified in the report of the EUA Joint Masters Project (EUA 2004, pp. 13-24).

1) **Academic**

- *Curriculum development* – content, course design, comparable degree structures, teaching methods, language of instruction, employment outcomes...
- *Approvals & accreditation* – adapting institutional procedures to allow for joint course ownership and approval, mutual recognition...
- *Academic entry requirements* – selection levels and procedures
- *Language entry requirements* – English? Bilingual?
- *Student access* – open to part-time and distance education students?
- *Moderation/comparability of assessment* – ensuring fair grading between institutions, compatibility of marking systems...
- *Grading & transcripts* – harmonisation of grading systems
- *Academic quality assurance* – responsibilities for academic review, student evaluation etc.

²¹ Both the University of Melbourne and Deakin University are members of successful consortia for the receipt of funding under this pilot project scheme, the former in the second round (2003) and the latter in the third round (2004).

²² An increased level of funding is available for the fourth round, allowing more than one project to be funded and expanding participation to the Vocational Education and Training sector. Higher education projects have also been re-focussed from the Masters to the undergraduate level.

²³ Under the Lisbon Convention, Australia has also committed to establishing a National Information Centre to disseminate information on its higher education system and qualifications and to promoting the use of the Diploma Supplement (see <http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/GovernmentActivities/GovernmentRelations/InternationalOrganisationsAndProgrammes/UNESCO.htm>).

2) **Operational**

- *Partnership/network management* - communication protocols, definition of administrative and academic responsibilities including student duty of care, program evaluation...
- *Scale of operation* – viable size of network/number of partner institutions
- *Student attractiveness* – need for feasibility studies and/or student focus groups to assess student interest prior to program development, i.e. desire and ability to participate
- *Program coordination within institutions* – central coordination, cross-University administrative structures...
- *Approvals & accreditation* – adapting institutional procedures to allow for joint course ownership and approval, mutual recognition...
- *Student exchange* – adapting (where necessary) existing procedures to cater for the specific nature of joint degree student mobility; ensuring balanced participation
- *Enrolment* – establishing criteria for enrolment, possibly related to issues of IT access and government entitlements for students...
- *Student fees* – compatibility between student fee practices in different countries, transfer of government entitlements from one country to another...
- *Certification of joint degrees* – joint or individual responsibility for certification?, format of degree certificate

3) **Resourcing**

- *Course costing* – analysis of costs involved in the development and operation of the joint degree, including staff mobility, administrative support, IT systems...
- *External funding* – a requirement of joint degree development? If so, what sources exist? If not, will only the more wealthy and prestigious universities be able to afford to participate?

Australian considerations and challenges

Bearing in mind the issues outlined above, Australian institutions also need to consider a broader sets of questions:

1) **Choice of partner countries**

- *Regional or global* – is the development of international joint degree programs most effectively implemented at a regional level? Should it be part of a regional policy for higher education?
- *Existing regional programs* – how do Australian universities best interact with existing regional (notably European) joint degree initiatives? The current focus of European policy effectively precludes the development of international joint degrees between Australian institutions and their European partners under the Erasmus Mundus program. Should Australian institutions seek to develop such programs with European partners outside the Erasmus Mundus framework?

2) **Choice of partner institutions**

- *Identification of suitable partners* – as a long-term, strategic and relatively resource-intensive program, choice of partner is crucial. How should such partners be identified? What balance of strategic and academic merit should be applied?
- *Responsibility for partner choice* – should universities adopt a centralised/overall approach or should individual faculties develop international joint degrees on a relatively independent basis?

3) **Assessment of financial impact**

- *Program funding and student fees* – the financial impact of international joint degree programs (including student mobility) needs careful consideration. What student fee arrangements need to be put in place to both encourage participation and to cover development and running costs? What supplementary funding might be needed to encourage and support students to undertake a substantial proportion of their study overseas? Issues of exchange balances and reciprocity in student numbers will also be crucial in this assessment.

CONCLUSION

The development and operation of international joint degrees present an ideal opportunity for Australian tertiary institutions to embrace internationalisation in a new and deeper way. Combining opportunities for the mobility of both staff and students, internationalisation of the curriculum and enhanced graduate outcomes for students, international joint degrees pull together many of the strands of current internationalisation strategies within institutions.

However, many challenges exist. International joint degrees are a relatively new and untested phenomenon and evidently require significant levels of academic and administrative commitment and collaboration in order to succeed. Furthermore, existing European policy in this area is not currently favourable to the participation of Australian institutions in European joint degree initiatives and programs.

Christian Tauch (2005) proposes that joint degrees may well constitute “a core tool for institutional development”. In his eyes they represent a “huge opportunity to foster mobility and facilitate the strategic positioning of institutions and networks” (Tauch 2005, p. 27).

Whether this is a strategic opportunity which Australian institutions are ready and able to embrace remains to be seen. This paper has sought to provide the basis of a framework for future decision-making in this area, by identifying generic and Australia-specific considerations and challenges.

Leading on from this analysis, ongoing research by the authors is seeking to map the current operation of international joint degrees between Australian institutions and their overseas partners.

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