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## ARTICLE

# Doubts and Dilemmas with Double Degree Programs

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**Abstract**

The number and types of international joint, double and consecutive degree programs have skyrocketed in the last five years, demonstrating that they clearly have a role in the current landscape of higher education. For many academics and policy makers, double and joint degree programs are welcomed as a natural extension of exchange and mobility programs. For others, they are perceived as a troublesome development leading to double counting of academic work and the thin edge of academic fraud. A broad range of reactions exist due to the diversity of program models; the involvement of new (bona fide and rogue) and traditional providers; the uncertainty related to quality assurance and qualifications recognition; and finally, the ethics involved in deciding what academic workload or new competencies are required for the granting of joint, double, multiple or consecutive degrees.

This article aims to clarify the confusion about the differences between a joint, a double and a consecutive degree program by providing a conceptual framework of definitions. It provides highlights from recent research surveys and studies, and looks at new developments and innovations in establishing these types of collaborative programs. Finally, it examines the factors that challenge

the operationalization of the programs and explores those issues that raise doubts and dilemmas and require further debate and analysis.

### **Keywords**

double degree programs, joint degree program, consecutive degree program, quality assurance, qualifications recognition, internationalization

## *Dudas y conflictos en torno a los programas de grado doble*

### **Resumen**

*Los programas de grado conjunto, doble y consecutivo han experimentado un extraordinario crecimiento en los últimos cinco años, tanto en su número como en su tipología, lo cual demuestra sin lugar a dudas que tienen un papel en el actual panorama de la educación superior. Una gran parte del mundo académico y los responsables del diseño de políticas acogen con satisfacción los programas de grado doble y de grado conjunto en tanto que ampliaciones naturales de los programas de intercambio y movilidad. Otros los consideran un desarrollo problemático que puede llevar a un doble cómputo del trabajo universitario y ser un primer paso en el fraude académico. La diversidad de modelos de programas, la participación de proveedores nuevos (reconocidos y fraudulentos) y tradicionales, la incertidumbre en torno al aseguramiento de la calidad y el reconocimiento de títulos, y, por último, los aspectos éticos implicados en la decisión de qué cargas de trabajo universitario o qué nuevas competencias son necesarias para conceder los grados conjuntos, dobles, múltiples o consecutivos dan lugar a una gran diversidad de reacciones.*

*El objetivo de este artículo es aclarar la confusión sobre las diferencias entre los programas de grado conjunto, doble y consecutivo, para lo que aportamos un marco conceptual de definiciones. Presentaremos informaciones destacadas procedentes de estudios y sondeos recientes, y examinaremos nuevos desarrollos e innovaciones en el establecimiento de este tipo de programas colaborativos. Finalmente, revisaremos los factores que dificultan la operatividad de los programas y exploraremos los aspectos que plantean dudas y conflictos y que requieren un debate y un análisis más profundos.*

### **Palabras clave**

*programas de grado doble, programa de grado conjunto, programa de grado consecutivo, garantía de calidad, reconocimiento de títulos, internacionalización*

## Introduction

The number and types of international joint, double and consecutive degree programs have skyrocketed in the last five years, demonstrating that they clearly have a role in the current landscape of higher education. As an internationalization strategy, they address the heartland of academia that is the teaching/learning process and the production of new knowledge between and among countries. These programs are built on the principle of international academic collaboration and can bring important benefits to individuals, institutions and national and regional education systems. The interest in them is increasing, but so is concern about the necessary academic requirements and the validity of a double or multiple degree qualification.

For many academics and policy makers, double and joint degree programs are welcomed as a natural extension of exchange and mobility programs. For others, they are perceived as a troublesome development leading to double counting of academic work and the thin edge of academic fraud. A broad range of reactions exist due to the diversity of program models; the involvement of new (bona fide and rogue) and traditional providers; the uncertainty related to quality assurance and qualifications recognition; and finally, the ethics involved in deciding what academic workload or new competencies are required for the granting of a joint, double, multiple or consecutive degree.

This article aims to clarify the confusion about the differences between a joint, a double and a consecutive degree program by providing a conceptual framework of definitions. It provides highlights from recent research surveys and studies, and looks at new developments and innovations in establishing these types of collaborative programs. Finally, it examines the factors that challenge the operationalization of the programs and explores those issues that raise doubts and dilemmas and require further debate and analysis.

## Diversity of Terms – Mass Confusion

A review of the literature, university web pages, survey reports and research articles shows a plethora of terms used to describe international collaborative programs, such as double and joint degrees. These terms include: double, multiple, tri-national, joint, integrated, collaborative, international, consecutive, concurrent, co-tutelle, overlapping, conjoint, parallel, simultaneous, and common degrees. They mean different things to different people within and across countries, thereby, causing mass confusion about the real meaning and use of these terms.

To deal with the confusion of so many terms, organizations, governmental bodies and institutions have correctly tried to provide a definition to clarify what they mean. Different regions of the world, indeed each country active in this aspect of international education, have proposed definitions that relate to the concepts integral to their native languages and to their policy frameworks. This has resulted in a multitude of definitions and another layer of complexity. An analysis of these definitions shows a variety of core concepts or elements used to describe double and joint degrees. They include: 1) number of collaborating institutions, 2) number of qualifications/certificates awarded, 3)

completion time, 4) organization of the program, 5) recognition bodies and 6) number of countries involved. Together, these concepts illustrate the myriad of ways that definitions can differ. While it is not the intention to propose a universal set of definitions, it is necessary to have some common understanding of what is meant in order to facilitate the collaborative agreements and mutual understanding that underpin these programs/degrees and to ensure that the qualifications awarded are recognized.

## Proposed Working Definitions

This section differentiates and defines three primary types of international collaborative programs: joint degree program, double degree program/multiple degree program and consecutive degree program (Knight 2008).

### *Joint Degree Program*

*"A joint degree program awards one joint qualification upon completion of the collaborative program requirements established by the partner institutions."*

The distinguishing feature of this type of international collaborative program is that only one qualification is awarded jointly by the cooperating institutions. The duration of the program is normally not extended and thus students have the advantage of completing a joint program in the same time period as an individual program from one of the institutions. The design and integration of the course of study varies from program to program, but it normally involves the mobility (physical or virtual) of students, professors and/or course content. It is important to emphasize that students travelling to the partner country for research or course work is not a requirement in all joint degrees programs. Visiting professors, distance courses and joint virtual research projects are options that provide valuable alternatives to student mobility.

Awarding a joint qualification can face many legal issues. National regulations often do not allow for a university to jointly confer a qualification, especially in association with a foreign institution. In this case, if both names of the collaborating institutions appear on the degree certificate, there is a risk that the joint degree will not be recognized by either of the host countries, meaning that the student does not have a legitimate qualification even though all program requirements have been completed. The situation becomes more complicated when one looks for an international body that will recognize a joint degree from two bona fide institutions. At this point, the Lisbon Convention for Recognition of Credentials is the only one of six UNESCO regional conventions that does so. Innovative ways to circumvent this problem have been developed by organizers of joint degree programs.

Overall, the most important features of a joint degree program are the strengths that each institution brings to the program and the opportunities it allows for students to benefit from a program that draws on the teaching, curricular and research expertise of two or more institutions

located in different countries. The major drawbacks at the current time are the issues related to the legality and recognition of a jointly conferred qualification.

### *Double Degree Program/Multiple Degree Program*

*"A double degree program awards two individual qualifications at equivalent levels upon completion of the collaborative program requirements established by the two partner institutions."*

A multiple degree program is essentially the same as a double degree program, except for the number of qualifications offered:

*"A multiple degree program awards three or more individual qualifications at equivalent levels upon completion of the collaborative program requirements established by the three or more partner institutions."*

As titles of bachelors' and masters' degrees and doctorates often differ across countries, the term 'equivalent level' is used to indicate that the double or multiple degrees conferred are of the same standing.

The duration of a double or multiple degree program can be extended beyond the length of a single degree program in order to meet the requirements of all partners participating in the collaborative program. The legality and recognition of the qualifications awarded by a double/multiple degree program are more straightforward than for joint degrees. It is assumed that each partner institution is officially registered or licensed in its respective country. Thus, awards offered by the enrolling institution in a collaborative program should be recognized in that country, while the other or double awards would be treated like any other foreign credential.

The major hurdles facing double/multiple degree programs involve the design of the curriculum and the establishment of completion requirements. There is no standard way to establish completion requirements due to the variety of disciplines, fields of study and national regulations involved. Each partnership does it according to the practices and legalities of the collaborating institutions. However, the double/multiple counting of the same student workload or of learning outcomes can put the academic integrity of the program in jeopardy. The idea of having two degrees from two different institutions in two different countries is attractive to students, but careful attention needs to be given to ensuring that the value and recognition of the qualifications are valid and do not violate the premise and academic purpose of a collaborative degree program. This is especially true for multiple degree programs.

### *Consecutive Degree Program*

*"A consecutive degree program awards two different qualifications at consecutive levels upon completion of the collaborative program requirements established by the partner institutions."*

Consecutive degree programs are becoming more popular both nationally and internationally. This kind of program basically involves two consecutive qualifications (usually bachelor's/master's degrees

or master's degree/doctorate) awarded when program requirements for each degree, as stipulated by the awarding institutions, are completed. For the international consecutive degree program, the two awarding institutions are located in different countries. In this case, it is usual for a student to be mobile and complete the course work and research requirements for the first degree in one country and the requirements for the second degree in the partner institution located in another country. The duration of the program is usually longer than a single program, but shorter than if the two degrees are taken separately.

## Major Surveys and Research Studies

Due to the relatively short history of international joint, double and consecutive degree (JD CD) programs compared to other types of academic partnerships, research on these programs remains limited. However, several large-scale regional surveys and other reports show a distinct increase in international collaborative programs in the last few years and forecast further growth, even if the definitions of joint, double and consecutive are not consistently used among researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

In Europe, the European University Association (EUA) highlighted the growth of JD CD programs in several survey reports as early as 2002 (Tauch & Rauhvargers, 2002). It is important to note that the term 'joint degree' is commonly used in Europe to include both joint and double degrees. The *Trends V* report documents the growth of joint degree programs particularly at master's degree level (Crosier, Purser & Smidt, 2007). However, this report also cautions that the additional financial cost required by these programs could ultimately limit their development and impact on institutional and regional goals for internationalization. The latest *Trends 2010* report also surveys institutions on the types of joint degree programs (bachelor's, master's and doctorate), new developments and legislative changes in permitting joint degrees. *Trends 2010* indicates that many institutions are developing joint degree programs as a response to an increasingly global job market (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). EUA's 2009 *Survey of Master Degrees in Europe* confirms further growth in joint degree programs but modest progress in legislative changes to allow the awarding of joint degrees (Davies, 2009).

In the United States, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) documented the diversity and growth of collaborative degree programs between American and international higher education institutions (HEIs) in its annual *International Graduate Admissions Survey* both in 2007 and 2008 (CGS, 2007; CGS, 2008). These initial efforts at investigating international JD CD programs reveal significant growth in double compared to joint degree programs, an increasing number of institutions with one or more JD CD programs, and partnerships with institutions mostly in Europe, China, India and South Korea (Redd, 2008).

In 2009, the Institute of International Education (USA) and Freie Universität Berlin produced a survey report on trans-Atlantic joint and double degree programs based on responses from 180 American and European HEIs (Kuder & Obst, 2009). The data show that American institutions are more likely to offer joint and double degrees at undergraduate level, while European institutions prefer graduate level. Interestingly, American institutions are more likely to use student fees to cover

the cost of these programs, while European institutions rely on institutional budgets and external funding, such as governments and foundations.

In Latin America, a recent survey (Gacel-Avila 2009) confirms the growth of double degree programs compared to joint ones and indicates that private institutions are using JD CD programs to recruit fee-paying students, while public ones view these programs as capacity-building tools to strengthen graduate education. Unlike the European case, graduate employability ranks lowly as a rationale for developing these programs. Instead, the top rationales are the internationalization of the curriculum and the provision of innovative programs.

Data on JD CD programs in Asia, Africa and the Middle East are not currently available. However, the EU-Asia Higher Education Platform (EAHEP) met in 2009 to discuss the use of joint degree programs to promote student and staff mobility and cultural exchanges between the two regions. This symposium also examined the benefits and challenges of international JD CD programs and recommended best practices for such collaborations given some of the challenges and dilemmas facing these initiatives.

Several other national or institutional reports also address the growth of international JD CD programs. At national level, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) completed a regional survey report with most respondents coming from Germany (Maiworm, 2006); another study examines German-Dutch joint degree programs (Nickel, Zdebel & Westerheijden, 2009); the Finnish Ministry of Education makes several recommendations for the development of joint and double degree programs (Ministry of Education, 2004). At institutional level, there are reports from the University of Graz, Austria (Maierhofer & Kribernegg, 2009) and the National University of Singapore (Kong, 2008). Lastly, the European Consortium for Accreditation recently published a report on quality assurance and accreditation issues related to international joint degree programs (Aerden & Reczulska, 2010).

## New Developments and Trends

These reports illustrate several new trends evident in the landscape of JD CD programs around the world. While it is difficult to assume that these trends apply to all countries and institutions promoting JD CD programs, they do illustrate some general trends worthy of serious consideration (Knight & Lee, in press).

- Double degree programs are far more common than joint degree programs. This is most likely due to legal barriers and administrative challenges in granting a joint diploma. Yet double degree programs raise the most doubts and dilemmas about completion requirements and legitimacy of the qualifications. Consecutive degree programs appear to be the least common but are also controversial.
- Most joint degree programs involve two rather than multiple institutions. Joint degree programs in most disciplines are commonly intra-regional rather than inter-regional. In

- contrast, double degree programs exhibit more inter-regional pairings that are remarkably international in scope.
- Joint and double degree programs are mostly at master's degree level, but there is increasing interest in developing collaborative doctorate programs that draw on expertise such as teaching, thesis supervision and the research specialties of different institutions. The short length and flexibility of many master's degree programs compared to bachelor's degree and doctorate programs probably facilitate international collaborative programming.
  - Many JDCD programs are in business or engineering disciplines, two areas that are often considered highly mobile and international in nature, and for which there is a market demand. MBA double degree programs are probably the most numerous and varied type of JDCD programs. As such they also raise many questions and issues.
  - JDCD programs are now incorporating an overseas internship component, especially in professional fields such as nursing and journalism. In some cases this is how student mobility is introduced into the program.
  - Online JDCD programs are being developed to facilitate program mobility. Some collaborative programs rely on faculty mobility rather than student mobility, or require student mobility only for the internship component. Conceivably, a student could complete an entire international JDCD program without ever leaving his/her home country. Although online programs may be more accessible to students with demanding schedules and/or limited resources, these students are deprived of the cultural immersion that characterizes many JDCD programs.
  - A new development is the creation of large consortia to provide a wide range of learning opportunities for students. For example, in 2010, Europe launched the Erasmus Mundus joint doctorate program in astrophysics, with the collaboration of 13 institutions. This international consortium includes both traditional universities in Europe and advanced research institutes worldwide. The research institutes provide cutting-edge scientific equipment and a community of highly skilled scientists to complement the academic environment of universities.
  - Another innovative measure is the consecutive degree program that offers two degrees at separate levels from two different countries. Some of these programs appear to act as new channels for graduate schools to recruit international students rather than as a collaborative program designed for both local and international students. Some double degree programs also offer diplomas in two very different disciplines (e.g., science and philosophy) in a time frame that is equivalent to a standard single-discipline degree.

## Issues and Challenges

The benefits of joint, double and consecutive degree programs are many and diverse, but so are the challenges that face the collaborating institutions involved in establishing these types of initiatives. Different regulatory systems, academic calendars, credit systems, tuition and scholarship schemes, teaching approaches and examination requirements are only a few of the more technical challenges



that need to be surmounted. This section identifies several academic issues that institutions and higher education authorities need to address in order to move ahead in the development and recognition of these programs and qualifications.

### *Alignment of Regulations and Customs*

National and institutional regulations and customs differ from country to country, and present many challenges for the design and implementation of international collaborative programs. For instance, there are often regulations preventing students from enrolling at more than one university at a time, or laws requiring students to spend their last year or semester at the home university, or mandatory practices regarding the recruitment and selection of students. Non-recognition or limitations on the number of courses/credits taken at a partner university are additional barriers. Different academic years can present problems for JDCD programs, in particular student mobility. However, they provide more opportunities for faculty exchange. Examination/evaluation requirements and procedures often present obstacles to double degree programs.

### *Quality Assurance and accreditation*

Quality assurance and accreditation are of fundamental importance but pose significant challenges for JDCD programs. When institutions have internal quality assurance procedures in place, quality review requirements for their own components can be met. But, it is more difficult to assure the quality of courses offered by a partner university. Common entrance and exit requirements are often used as quality proxies, but it would be helpful if mutual recognition of respective quality assurance programs (where they exist) were included in the agreement for a collaborative program.

Accreditation is even more of a challenge, as national systems do not exist in all countries around the world. Where they do exist, an added challenge is that accreditation agencies differ enormously; some focus on programs and others on institutions, some focus on inputs and others on processes or outputs. Furthermore, the establishment of procedures for accrediting international collaborative programs is relatively new territory for many agencies.

For the time being, the best case scenario is that accreditation is completed by each partner institution involved in a double, joint, consecutive degree program. For professional programs, there are international accreditation agencies like ABET or EQUIS, which may be appropriate for joint or double degree programs. However, at the current time, more institutions have their home programs accredited by these professional accreditation bodies than their double or joint degree programs. An important question is whether regional, national or international accreditation is the best route for international collaborative programs.

### *Language*

The language of instruction for joint and double degree programs introduces new complexities. Each partner usually offers its programs in the home teaching language and, in some cases, in English. This means that courses may be offered in at least three different languages, or more if multiple

partners are involved. Students need to be at least bilingual – usually their native language/s plus English. There are two issues at play here. The first is the dominance of English in cases where English is not the native language of any of the partners. This underscores the Anglicization trend, or what some call ‘language imperialism’ in the higher education sector (and many other sectors as well). Are international collaborative programs encouraging the overuse of English and the standardization of the curriculum? The second issue relates to the required proficiency level of students/professors in the second language of instruction/research, and the training needed to help students/academics meet language proficiency requirements. The positive side of the language issue is that students are required to be bilingual or multilingual, which helps their communication skills, employability and understanding of another culture. However, the establishment of language requirements and the availability of improvement courses need to be made crystal clear by each partner in the collaborative agreement. It is imperative that teaching and learning standards remain high, even when non-native language is being used by all institutions and students involved in the program.

### *Fees and Financing*

Financial issues such as tuition fees and funding can be quite complex. It is clear that revenue generation is not usually the primary motive for these kinds of programs as they often require extra investments by the institutions or higher tuition fees charged to students (Maierhofer & Krieberegg, 2009). In countries that do not charge tuition fees per se, or have limited autonomy to set fees, the extra costs must be borne by the institutions or external funders. However, the sustainability of a program can often be at risk when it is dependent on external funds. The development of a program becomes more complicated when multiple partners with different tuition fees are involved, or when there are extra costs for the professors’ physical and virtual mobility. Arrangements for joint costs regarding marketing, recruiting, assessments and administration also need to be negotiated. In those cases where revenue is generated, an agreement for income distribution is necessary.

## **Doubts and Dilemmas**

In addition to paying attention to academic alignment and technical questions, there are other macro issues that also need to be considered, as they are often expressed as doubts and dilemmas. These revolve around the questions such as: What is really driving the growth of JCD programs? Are they sustainable without external funding sources? What are the certification processes? Are qualifications being recognized as legitimate ones? And, lastly, how are completion requirements and standards being established and met?

### *Student Rationales – Quality experience or two degrees for the price of one?*

Students are attracted to JCD programs for a number of reasons. The opportunity to be part of a program that offers two degrees from two universities located in different countries is seen to

enhance their employability prospects and career path. Some students believe that a collaborative program is of higher quality given that the expertise of two universities has shaped the academic program. This is especially true for joint degrees. Other students are not as interested in enhanced quality but are attracted to the opportunity to obtain two degrees 'for the price of one,' so to speak. They argue that the duration is shorter for a double or consecutive degree program, the workload is definitely less than for two single degrees, and there is less of a financial burden too. This argument is not valid for all programs of this type, but there is an element of truth in these claims. Double degree programs are being presented by a leading European international education organization as "a lot easier to achieve and not necessarily less valid" and "two degrees for the price of one." Finally, the status factor cannot be ignored. There is a certain sense of elitism attached to having academic credentials from universities in different countries, even if the student never studied abroad but benefited from distance education and visiting foreign professors.

### *Institutional Drivers – Capacity building or status building?*

JCDC degree programs can lead to a deeper, more sustainable type of relationship than other internationalization program strategies, such as twinning and franchising. Academic benefits in terms of curriculum innovation, exchanges of professors and researchers, and access to expertise and networks of the partner university make joint degrees especially attractive. Consecutive degrees allow institutions to work with partners that may offer a master's degree, doctorate program or specialty that is not available at their own university.

For other institutions, the primary rationale is to increase their reputation and ranking as an international university. This is accomplished by deliberately collaborating with partners of equal or greater status. This type of status building applies to institutions in both developed and developing countries. For instance, institutions in developing countries seek double degree programs with developed country partners, as they can indirectly verify the quality of their program because courses are judged to be equivalent in order to count towards a double or multiple degree. Examples exist of institutions that believe that a collaborative program with a partner of greater status will also help or even bypass their national accreditation processes. Finally, collaborative programs are perceived by some universities as a way to attract talented students who may want to stay for work experience after graduation, and perhaps immigrate permanently. These present enduring questions and doubts about what is truly driving institutions to promote more and more JDCD programs.

### *Sustainability*

The financial investment required to launch these kinds of programs is a subject worthy of further investigation. In some cases, the bulk of the extra costs can be borne by increasing student tuition fees, which in turn makes the program quite elitist and only available to financially independent or supported students. In other situations, costs are absorbed by the institutions. So far, the driving force for collaborative programs does not appear to have been income generation, unlike cross-border

programs (e.g., franchise and twinning programs, and the recruitment of foreign students). All in all, the sustainability of JDCD programs reliant on external funding from governments, businesses or foundations is vulnerable, as are programs that are totally dependent on student fees.

### *Certification*

The granting of legal certification for the award, and the subsequent recognition of the qualifications awarded, are by far the most vexing issues. As already discussed, there are only a few countries – although the number is increasing – that legally allow one of its universities to confer a joint qualification in partnership with an institution in another country. This means that the student often gets a formal diploma from one university and an unofficial certificate from the other/s, indicating that it was a joint collaborative program. For some students, this is not a problem as it is the international nature of the academic program that is most important, and not the qualification. For others, this is not the case, as credentialism is an increasingly important concern to students.

### *Recognition and Legitimacy of Qualifications*

Employers, academic institutions and credential evaluation agencies all need to be cognizant of what is entailed in the granting and recognition of double or multiple qualifications. There is a perception that some double, multiple and consecutive degrees are more legitimate than others, but this is merely a perception, and one that is difficult to prove. The recognition process raises legitimacy or misrepresentation issues often associated with double/multiple degree qualifications – more than with joint or consecutive qualifications. Part of the concern rests with the double counting of course credits/workload for two or more qualifications. This has led to the ‘two for the price of one’ label for double degrees. In this case, cost is measured not only in monetary terms, but also in student workload terms.

### *Completion Requirements*

The diversity of models used to determine the completion requirements for double/multiple degree programs is extremely varied. There is no single explanation or standard framework used to set program completion requirements. This raises the critical question of whether the framework is based on 1) the number of completed courses/credits, 2) the student workload or 3) required outcomes/competencies. These three approaches lead to different explanations and doubts regarding the legitimacy of the double/multiple degrees awarded. The value of a qualification/credential is at the root of the murkiness surrounding the acceptability or legitimacy of double/multiple degrees emanating from a collaborative program. Many would argue that attributing the same courses or workload towards two or more degrees from two or more institutions devalues the validity of a qualification. Others believe that if students meet the stated learning outcomes/competencies required to obtain a qualification, regardless of where or how the competencies are acquired, the credential is legitimate. This logic infers that double and multiple degrees, based on a set of core courses or competencies and augmented by the additional requirements of

collaborating institutions, are academically sound and legitimate; it is the process for recognizing these qualifications that requires more attention, and not the completion requirements per se. Both arguments are valid, but the variety of models used prevents a clear resolution to the question of legitimacy. Doubt remains.

## Final Words

Clearly, the debate is nuanced and complicated by national policies, customs and interpretations of what constitutes the requirements for a qualification. The critical point emanating from the doubts and different interpretations of the legitimacy of double/multiple degrees is that rigorous analysis is required. Stakeholders, including students, higher education institutions, employers, accreditation and quality assurance agencies, policy makers, academic leaders and credential recognition bodies, need to address this issue individually and collectively. Similarities and differences among countries and stakeholders need to be acknowledged and respected, but there needs to be some common understanding about what two or more qualifications at the same level emanating from a double or multiple degree collaborative program actually represent and signify.

The challenge facing the higher education sector is to work out a common understanding of what joint, double and consecutive programs actually mean and involve, and to iron out the academic alignment issues inherent to working in different national regulatory frameworks, cultures and practices. Most importantly, a robust debate on the vexing questions of accreditation, recognition and legitimacy of qualifications needs to take place to ensure that international collaborative programs and their awards are respected and welcomed by students, higher education institutions and employers around the world, and do not lead to undesirable unintended consequences.

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