International Joint- and Double-Degree Programs

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While the international exchange of students continues to occur predominantly through traditional, study-abroad programs, a growing number of higher education institutions have also begun to establish joint- and double-degree programs. This development, which largely started in Europe in the 1990s, has become an important global trend—prompting higher education institutions, governments, and funding and accreditation agencies worldwide to consider strategies and policies with regard to cross-border collaborative degree programs.

In response to this burgeoning trend, the Institute of International Education and Freie Universität Berlin conducted an international survey in spring 2011. The survey addressed itself to higher education institutions that offer joint- and double-degree programs, receiving responses from 245 institutions in 28 countries. The subsequent report, Joint and Double Degree Programs in the Global Context, presents the findings from a global perspective, as well as country-specific trends for the 6 countries with the highest number of responding institutions: Australia, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

HOW MANY ARE THERE AND WHAT ARE THE TRENDS?

First, the bad news: The survey cannot provide accurate information on the total number

of existing joint- or double-degree programs. Just as it is impossible to determine the exact number of standard-degree programs, so it is with collaborative-degree endeavors. However, the available data suggest that such programs are growing: 95 percent of the 245 responding higher education institutions plan to expand their current portfolios of joint- or double-degree programs in the future. This figure is remarkable, given that many institutions reported having difficulties with the development of their existing joint- or double-degree programs. About one-third of all survey participants confirmed that they canceled some of their programs in the past, for a variety of reasons—including, lack of student interest, lack of funding, and unsustainability. Survey participants identified the latter two as the most pressing challenges in developing and maintaining joint- and double-degree programs.

Most higher education professionals involved in collaborative-degree programs emphasize the uniqueness of each program, seconding the claim that "one-size-fits-all" approaches are ill-fated. Nevertheless, based on the survey responses, it is possible to discern what constitutes a "mainstream" collaborative-degree program: A double-degree master's program in business management or engineering that is taught in English, includes a partner institution from a European country, has a student enrollment rate of 25 or less, and was initiated between 2001 and 2009. According to the outlook of survey participants, such programs will remain common, in the near future.

The majority of respondents who plan to develop more collaborative-degree programs aim to do so for double-degree programs, at the master's level. The most favored disciplines continue to be business management or engineering. However, there is a marked difference in terms of regional distribution. While higher education institutions from European countries dominate the list of existing collaborative-degree programs, it is expected that in the future such programs will become more diverse, with the United States and China becoming increasingly involved—along with higher

education institutions in Asia (India, in particular), South America (Brazil, in particular), and Canada and Australia.

JOINT VS. DOUBLE DEGREES

What is the difference between a joint- and a double-degree program? Definitions of international collaborative-degree programs often differ between institutions, countries, or continents. For the survey, we chose a general definition: a collaborative-degree program is one that is offered by two or more institutions in different countries and features a jointly developed and integrated curriculum, as well as a clear agreement on credit recognition. The line between joint and double was drawn according to the degree-awarding praxis. In joint-degree programs, students receive a degree certificate issued jointly by the host institutions; in double-degree programs, students were given degree certificates, issued separately by each of the institutions involved in the program.

The survey results highlight other characteristics that differentiate joint from double-degree programs. While the latter are much more common—with 84 percent of survey participants offering double-degree programs—joint-degree programs seem to represent a more integrated and complex form of cooperation. Roughly, 72 percent of the reported joint-degree programs are stand-alone programs; that is, they were built exclusively as joint ventures with foreign universities. In contrast, many double-degree programs are established as an additional track to an already existing degree program. Another indicator is student selection and enrollment. The majority of the reported joint-degree programs features the joint selection of students, whereas for double-degree programs universities often select students separately, though based on jointly agreed-on criteria. In joint-degree programs, students tend to be enrolled at both (or more) cooperating institutions for the entire degree period, which is not necessarily the case for double-degree programs.

INSTITUTIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND A LACK OF STRATEGY

Institutional motivations for the development of collaborative-degree programs varied, with the highest scores attributed to (1) broadening educational offerings, (2) strengthening research collaboration, (3) advancing internationalization, and (4) raising the international visibility/prestige of the institution. The least important motivations were increasing revenue and offering courses from partner institutions that do not exist at the home institution. Given that most joint- and double-degree programs enroll small numbers of students, the former is not surprising. Interestingly, the latter, which proponents of collaborative-degree programs often refer to in the context of "synergies" and "resource pooling," seems to play a marginal role.

While 91 percent of respondents indicated that the development of collaborative-degree programs was an integral part of their institution's internationalization efforts, this is not necessarily mirrored in their respective institutional policies. According to the responses, a large number of universities either lack a clear strategy for developing joint- and double-degree programs or have yet to implement it. Fewer than half of the responding institutions have created particular marketing and recruitment initiatives, despite the fact that the majority of them aim to attract top international students for their joint- or double-degree programs. While two-thirds of the responding institutions have policies for addressing the issue of double counting of credits, their comments suggest that these policies are implemented on departmental, as opposed to institutional levels.

Overall, the survey indicates that strategies and internal regulations for collaborative-degree programs are not sufficiently developed, yet, at many higher education institutions. The most frequently mentioned challenges (funding and sustainability) might in fact be direct consequences of these institutional shortcomings. While most joint- and double-degree programs spring from existing partnerships and are nourished by individual faculty engagement, institutions are well advised to include

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top-down elements, with clear institutional policies and guidelines—in order to avoid uncontrolled growth and, most importantly, to ensure quality standards