

Recognition-First Cross-Border Doctorates: Designing Single, Dual and Joint PhD Awards for Global Legitimacy

Sixbert Sangwa*¹

¹Office of the President, Open Christian University, Sacramento, CA 95811, United States

*Corresponding Author: ssangwa@openchristian.education

Abstract

Background: Cross-border doctoral education is now a mainstream feature of global knowledge production, yet the portability of the resulting PhD, its recognition across jurisdictions, remains an under-addressed design constraint that can undermine graduates' opportunities and programme legitimacy. **Purpose:** This article advances a recognition-first thesis: recognition outcomes should be treated as a first-order requirement in the design of cross-border doctoral partnerships, alongside academic quality. It compares the recognition implications of single-award, dual/double-award, and joint-award PhD credential models and proposes design and policy guidance to reduce recognition friction without diluting doctoral standards. **Methods:** Using an exclusively secondary-data design and PRISMA-aligned systematic document analysis, the study synthesises international recognition instruments, quality assurance frameworks, and recognition practice manuals (including guidance used by credential evaluators). The analysis is interpreted through neo-institutional, legitimacy, signalling, and agency perspectives to connect macro-level norms with micro-level credential and documentation choices. **Results:** The findings show that, despite strong normative commitments to fair recognition (including the principle that qualifications should be recognised unless "substantial differences" are demonstrated), joint doctoral degrees can still encounter practical barriers where legal categories, administrative routines, or verifier capacity lag behind policy. Recognition outcomes are consistently shaped by (1) unambiguous credential wording and issuer identification, (2) comprehensive diploma supplement/transcript detail, and (3) traceable quality assurance and accreditation evidence. In current conditions, recognition risk tends to be lowest for the single-award model, moderate for dual awards (often functioning as a redundancy strategy), and highest-variance for joint awards, which can succeed but depend heavily on legal accommodation and documentation quality. **Implications:** The article contributes a conceptual model linking recognition regimes to programme design decisions and offers a recognition-risk matrix to guide universities, quality assurance agencies, and regulators. A recognition-first approach strengthens both mobility and credential integrity by making legitimate cross-border doctorates easier to verify and harder to counterfeit.

Keywords: cross-border doctoral education; joint PhD degree recognition; dual/double doctoral degrees; credential evaluation; diploma supplement; quality assurance and accreditation; Lisbon Recognition Convention

Accepted: Dec 27, 2025

Published: Jan 09, 2026

CITATION

Sangwa, S. (2026). *Recognition-First Cross-Border Doctorates: Designing Single, Dual and Joint PhD Awards for Global Legitimacy*. *Open Journal of Transformative Education & LifeLong Learning*, Vol 2(1). *Open Christian Press*.

DOI: [10.65655/OCP.0077](https://doi.org/10.65655/OCP.0077)

COPYRIGHT

Open Journal of Transformative Education & LifeLong Learning is published by Open Christian Press. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license. Copyright © 2026 by author(s).

PUBLISHER INFO

Open Christian Press—the publishing arm of Open Christian University—is produced in partnership with the Center for Faith and Work.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this work are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the positions of the publisher, the funders, or the authors' affiliated institutions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background Context: Cross-border higher education has moved from a niche mobility activity to an integral part of global knowledge production (Altbach & Knight, 2007; OECD, 2025). This shift has been driven by the massification of postgraduate study, digital delivery

modes, and aggressive internationalisation strategies by universities (British Council, 2024; OECD, 2024, 2025). Within this context, collaborative doctoral provision, including co-tutelle arrangements, dual PhDs and joint doctoral programmes, is increasingly presented as a way to widen access to research training, pool supervisory expertise, and embed candidates in multiple scholarly ecosystems (EUA, 2024). For many doctoral candidates,

however, the most consequential output of their education remains the formal qualification itself: the PhD diploma (and its accompanying records) that must travel across borders and be recognised for purposes of employment, professional licensure or further study. The ease with which a degree is recognised internationally is a key determinant of its holder's opportunities, making portability a critical component of a doctorate's value and credibility.

Recognition regimes have evolved to support greater mobility. In Europe, the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) established the principle that foreign qualifications should be recognised unless a substantial difference can be demonstrated between the foreign qualification and the local one (EHEA, 2016). This enshrines a presumption of recognition: the burden is on authorities to prove a deficiency if they wish to deny equivalence. Globally, UNESCO's new Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications (entered into force 2023) extends these fair recognition principles worldwide, mandating transparent, non-discriminatory assessment of foreign degrees (UNESCO, 2019). Together, these instruments signal a normative shift: recognition is not merely a technical or bureaucratic step, but a rights-bearing governance function shaping academic and professional mobility. Students are entitled to fair consideration of their credentials, and states party to these conventions accept obligations to facilitate recognition (e.g. by providing information on their education system, establishing appeals processes, and appointing national information centres) (EHEA, 2016).

Paradoxically, the very innovations that drive cross-border doctoral education are those that strain recognition systems (EUA, 2024; Nuffic, 2020). Traditional assumptions—one degree equals one national system, one issuing institution, and one legal framework—are disrupted by joint and dual programmes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). For example, a joint doctoral programme may result in a single diploma issued by two universities from different countries, or a dual award where a candidate receives two PhD certificates for one integrated programme (EHEA, 2020). These complex award structures challenge credential evaluators, who must interpret unfamiliar formats and verify multiple issuing authorities under bounded time and information. Even within Europe, where policy texts strongly encourage recognition of joint

degrees “*unless substantial differences are shown*”, practical implementation hinges on details: clear documentation, quality assurance traceability, and legal acceptability in the country where recognition is sought. Recognition practice manuals underline that decisions depend heavily on the availability of reliable information about the qualification, consistent documentation (e.g. diploma supplements), and adherence to established procedures. In short, the design of cross-border doctoral credentials is not only an academic or administrative matter, but also a policy and ethics question about fairness and transparency in global education markets.

1.2 Problem Statement: Despite the maturation of international norms, the recognition of jointly-delivered degrees (including joint PhDs) still encounters “*difficulties of a legal and practical nature*” (OECD, 2005). This is far from a trivial bureaucratic glitch. For doctoral graduates, inconsistent recognition can mean the difference between having one's PhD accepted as a terminal research qualification or being told it is a non-equivalent or ambiguous credential requiring special evaluation. Such outcomes can affect a graduate's job prospects, academic progression, or professional rights (e.g. the title of “Doctor”) in their home country. For universities, uncertainty in how a collaboratively awarded PhD will be treated abroad translates into reputational risk and potential harm to students, which in turn can lead to conflicts with regulators or accrediting bodies. For regulators, the stakes are twofold: they must protect the public from fraudulent or sub-standard degrees (a real concern in an era of diploma mills and cross-border “franchises”), yet they also have a duty under global conventions to avoid unfair barriers to legitimate qualifications (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025a). Achieving this balance is challenging when faced with atypical credentials that do not fit neatly into national frameworks.

The persistence of recognition problems for joint and dual degrees is structurally predictable (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). Such models inherently increase information asymmetry between, on one hand, the institutions designing complex cross-border programmes and, on the other, the recognition authorities tasked with evaluating credentials. The institutions may fully understand the collaborative nature and quality controls of their programme, but an evaluator in another country often has only the diploma and accompanying documents to rely on (Nuffic, 2020). Under time

constraints and heterogeneous national rules, any ambiguity or missing information can lead to a conservative decision (e.g. treating the degree as unrecognised or requiring case-by-case scrutiny). In effect, students bear the risk of any uncertainty. Current debates in international higher education tend to celebrate academic collaboration and innovative delivery models, while treating downstream recognition as an afterthought. This paper contends that recognition outcomes must instead be treated as a primary design constraint in cross-border doctoral education – as fundamental as academic quality or curriculum design – because the credential's portability is part of its intrinsic legitimacy and educational value. A doctoral programme that fails to produce a broadly recognisable degree risks undermining its own graduates and purpose.

To illustrate the core problem, consider a hypothetical collaboration: “University X” (a pseudonymous unaccredited institution) partners with an accredited university to co-deliver a PhD by research. They face a choice among three credentialing options for graduates: (1) a single PhD award granted solely by the accredited university (with the collaboration documented but not resulting in a separate degree from the unaccredited partner); (2) two separate doctoral diplomas – a double or dual PhD – one from each institution; or (3) one joint PhD degree certificate, officially conferred by both institutions together. This choice has profound implications for whether graduates can get their degrees recognised as equivalent to a “normal” PhD in various jurisdictions. Yet too often, such decisions are made without consulting recognition experts or considering cross-border portability. The prevailing academic discourse may emphasise the innovative pedagogy or quality assurance arrangements, but if the eventual degree certificate confuses foreign credential evaluators or violates a technical legal rule, graduates may pay the price. The central problem addressed in this study is thus: *How can we design cross-border doctoral programmes such that degree recognition is assured as far as possible, without diluting academic standards?* In other words, how can recognition be “built in” from the start rather than treated as a post-hoc formality?

1.3 Research Objectives: This study seeks to reposition degree recognition as a first-order design requirement in cross-border doctoral partnerships and, on that basis, to develop practical guidance for stakeholders.

The general objective is to advance a recognition-first framework for joint and dual doctoral programmes, one that foregrounds portability and legitimacy in programme design. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. **Synthesize normative expectations** embedded in major recognition instruments and guidance texts regarding joint, dual, and collaboratively delivered qualifications – clarifying what international conventions, regional agreements, and best-practice manuals demand of recognition processes.
2. **Identify key determinants** (legal, informational, and quality assurance features) that most strongly condition whether doctoral awards from collaborative arrangements are deemed equivalent in receiving jurisdictions. This involves pinpointing which aspects of a programme's documentation or structure raise or reduce red flags for evaluators.
3. **Evaluate the comparative recognition-risk profile** of three common PhD credentialing options – single awards, dual/double degrees, and joint degrees – when used in a cross-border partnership. This evaluation will consider various national scenarios to gauge where each model might encounter obstacles or acceptance.
4. **Propose a recognition-first design framework and policy recommendations** that universities and regulators can operationalise without lowering academic standards. This includes developing a decision matrix for selecting an optimal credential structure and suggesting reforms or practices to ease recognition frictions.

Through these objectives, the study aspires to bridge the gap between high-level recognition principles and the on-the-ground design choices facing cross-border doctoral initiatives.

1.4 Research Questions: To address the objectives, the inquiry is guided by five research questions:

1. **International Norms:** How do international recognition norms conceptualise fair assessment when a qualification originates from a joint or multi-institutional doctoral arrangement, and what obligations do these norms place on recognition authorities?

2. **Documentation Features:** Which documentary features of collaborative doctoral provision – such as the wording on the award certificate, the details provided in the diploma supplement or transcript, and the traceability of quality assurance – most directly shape recognition decisions in practice?
3. **Legal/Administrative Barriers:** Under what conditions do joint degrees remain legally or administratively difficult to recognise, even where policies nominally encourage their recognition?
4. **Comparative Risk:** For students seeking predictable degree equivalence in their home countries, which of the three PhD credentialing options (single award, dual degree, joint degree) minimises recognition uncertainty while preserving the academic integrity of a PhD by research?
5. **Policy and Reform:** What regulatory and institutional reforms would reduce recognition friction for legitimate cross-border doctorates, while simultaneously strengthening protection against low-quality or deceptive provision, as highlighted in the global accreditation paradox literature (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025a)?

These questions move from the conceptual (international norms) through the practical (documentation and legal obstacles) to the prescriptive (optimal models and reforms). Each will be addressed in the Findings and Discussion (Section 4).

1.5 Expected Contributions: By tackling the above questions, the study offers several contributions to scholarship and practice:

- **Conceptual contribution:** It advances a recognition-first account of cross-border doctoral design. Rather than viewing recognition as a post-graduation administrative hurdle, the study reframes it as part of the programme's governance architecture that fundamentally shapes a degree's legitimacy and the student experience. In doing so, it highlights why the portability of a qualification is integral to its value, not an externality. This recognition-first orientation aligns with an outcomes-first logic in educational design (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025b).
- **Normative contribution:** The analysis clarifies how the principle "recognise qualifications unless a substantial difference is shown" can be operationalised in the context of joint and dual doctoral degrees. It argues that providing comprehensive information and documentation is not a peripheral task but central to enabling fair recognition. This reinforces international norms by detailing what due diligence in recognition should look like from both providers and evaluators.
- **Empirical contribution:** The study consolidates dispersed evidence from policy instruments, recognition manuals, and quality assurance guidelines into a coherent model of recognition risk factors. By synthesising examples and criteria scattered across sources, it creates an integrated perspective on why some cross-border PhDs face recognition problems while others do not.
- **Practical contribution:** A decision framework (including a recognition-risk matrix) is developed to guide universities and regulators in choosing credential structures for co-designed PhD programmes. This framework is explicitly aimed at improving the portability of doctoral qualifications for graduates who will seek equivalence across jurisdictions. It translates abstract principles into concrete design choices (e.g. how to word a joint diploma, what to include in a supplement) that can be implemented without lowering academic standards.
- **Policy contribution:** The study speaks to regulators and international bodies by demonstrating that the same design choices which facilitate recognition (e.g. transparent documentation, adherence to quality frameworks) also strengthen safeguards against disreputable provision. In other words, recognition-friendly design aligns with fraud prevention and quality assurance goals. By making this case, the research encourages a convergence of mobility and protection imperatives, informing ongoing policy discourse at bodies like UNESCO, OECD, and the European Higher Education Area.

Through these contributions, the manuscript not only adds to academic understanding of cross-border higher education governance but also offers timely guidance to those shaping the future of doctoral education across borders.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

A robust explanation of recognition outcomes for cross-border doctoral credentials requires an interdisciplinary theoretical lens, illuminating issues of legitimacy, information asymmetry, and institutional behaviour. Three complementary perspectives are utilised to build the conceptual framework: neo-institutional theory, legitimacy theory, and signalling/agency theory. Figure 1 presents the resulting conceptual model, linking macro-level forces (global norms, national regulations, quality assurance regimes) to micro-level decisions (university policies on credential format, documentation practices), and positing how these linkages affect recognition outcomes. In essence, macro-level institutional pressures set the expectations and constraints, while micro-level choices signal (for better or worse) the legitimacy of a degree to recognition authorities.

2.1 Neo-Institutional Theory: Neo-institutional theory explains why certain organisational forms and practices become taken-for-granted as the legitimate way of doing things. In the context of doctoral credentials, neo-institutionalism suggests that universities and regulators gravitate towards “institutionalised templates” of what a real PhD award looks like. Over time, particular models of degree awarding (for instance, a single national diploma issued by a sole university) become legitimised by habit, law, and collective expectation. Institutions feel pressure to conform to these templates to secure legitimacy in the eyes of key stakeholders (students, employers, state authorities). This perspective helps to explain why recognition authorities might be sceptical of unfamiliar award formats: anything deviating from the established template (say, a jointly signed diploma, or two diplomas for one degree) challenges deeply ingrained notions of authenticity.

Likewise, universities may opt for conservative credential designs even in innovative programmes, seeking to align with dominant norms and avoid raising questions. Classic works by Meyer and Rowan and DiMaggio and Powell highlight how organisations implement formal structures as myth and ceremony (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) – signals that they are “proper” institutions in line with societal rules. In cross-border PhDs, a neo-institutional lens predicts inertia and isomorphism: despite new partnership models, actors will lean towards familiar credential forms to ensure acceptance. The theory thus sensitises us to the path-dependent nature of legitimacy – and why breaking the one-degree-one-nation mold is inherently difficult.

2.2 Legitimacy Theory: Legitimacy theory complements the above by focusing on the social judgement aspect of recognition. Here, a doctoral degree’s legitimacy is not automatic but is conferred by audiences with evaluative power – notably credential evaluators, academic accrediting bodies, employers, and professional licensing authorities. From this angle, recognition is a process of managing perceptions and meeting the criteria of these audiences. Universities engaged in cross-border provision must actively manage legitimacy through strategies like transparent documentation, external quality endorsements, and alignment with recognised standards (e.g. adhering to national qualification frameworks or using language that matches conventional degree titles).

Mark Suchman’s framework on managing organisational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) is instructive: he distinguishes pragmatic legitimacy (meeting immediate stakeholder interests), moral legitimacy (adherence to values/norms), and cognitive legitimacy (becoming taken-for-granted as necessary or appropriate). A joint PhD programme might seek pragmatic legitimacy by stressing the tangible benefits (e.g. dual resources, international experience), moral legitimacy by citing UNESCO guidelines or national approvals, and cognitive legitimacy by making its degree documentation mirror the style of traditional degrees. Legitimacy theory thus examines how and why recognition can be withheld even if academic substance is strong, often because the credential fails to align with expected patterns or invokes distrust. It reminds us that recognition decisions are not purely technical evaluations of knowledge; they are socially situated judgments balancing trust, risk, and precedent.

2.3 Signalling and Agency Perspectives: The third pillar addresses the crucial problem of information asymmetry in cross-border recognition. Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) posits that educational credentials serve as signals of certain qualities (skills, knowledge, institutional quality) to observers under conditions of uncertainty. The strength of the signal depends on its credibility and clarity. In our case, a PhD certificate and its supplement act as signals to recognition authorities; their content and format must convince a sceptical evaluator that “this is a legitimate PhD”. Any ambiguity – e.g. an unfamiliar university name, or wording that obscures who awarded the degree – can weaken the signal, leading evaluators to either do extra checks or default to caution (potential non-recognition). Agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) further enriches the picture by viewing universities

and quality assurance agencies as agents who are expected to act on behalf of principals (students, the public, and receiving-country regulators). In cross-border education, misalignment of incentives and information (agency problems) can occur: the providers may have more information about the programme's integrity than the recogniser does, and if any part of the arrangement looks dubious, the recogniser (as a principal guarding public interest) may assume the worst to avoid risk. Complex joint arrangements can increase agency costs and perceived risks because accountability is diffused across multiple institutions and jurisdictions. For example, if two universities co-award a degree, who is ultimately responsible for its quality? The recognition authority must

trust that all partners upheld standards, which is harder to ensure than in a single-institution degree. In sum, signalling theory underlines the importance of how degrees communicate legitimacy, while agency theory explains the heightened scrutiny and documentation demands placed on atypical awards as rational responses to principal-agent uncertainties. Together, these perspectives support this paper's central claim: credential structure and documentation are not cosmetic details; they materially shape recognition outcomes because they shape how legitimacy and information travel across contexts.

Macro-level regime

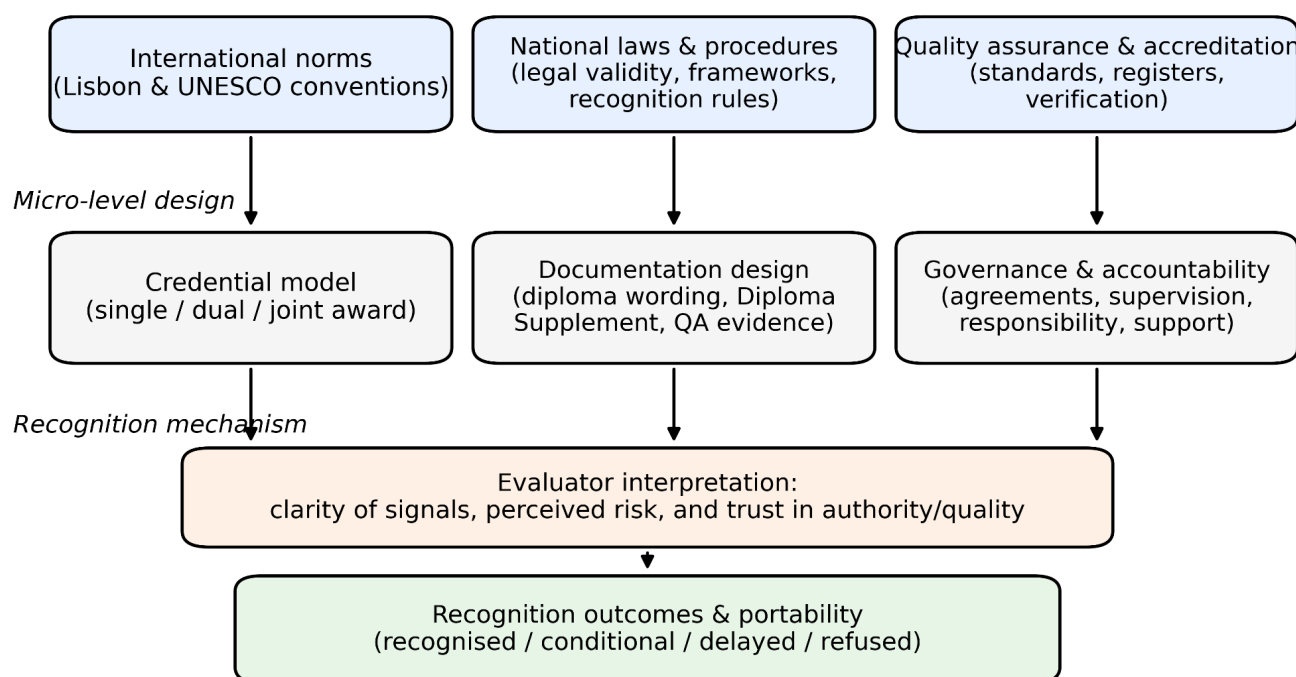


Figure 1. Conceptual model linking macro-level recognition regimes and micro-level programme design factors in cross-border doctoral education. International norms, national laws, and quality assurance/accreditation frameworks shape institutional choices regarding credential structure (single, dual, or joint award), documentation design (e.g., diploma wording and diploma supplement), and governance/accountability arrangements. These micro-level choices function as legitimacy signals under conditions of information asymmetry, thereby conditioning evaluators' recognition decisions and resulting recognition outcomes/portability

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: The study adopts a qualitative secondary research design, drawing on multiple sources of documentary evidence. Given the policy-oriented nature of the questions, a systematic

document analysis was conducted, aligning with PRISMA 2020 guidelines for transparent and reproducible reviews. The design is PRISMA-compliant in that it specifies the search strategy, inclusion criteria, and synthesis steps, thereby providing an audit trail. The approach is also triangulated: evidence is gathered from several complementary streams (legal texts, policy reports,

recognition manuals, scholarly literature) to cross-verify findings and reduce bias (Page et al., 2021). No human subjects or primary data were involved, ensuring that the analysis is based exclusively on publicly available secondary sources.

Three major evidence streams were systematically reviewed: (a) International and regional recognition instruments, along with their interpretative guidelines; (b) Quality assurance frameworks and cross-border higher education policy documents; and (c) Recognition practice manuals and evaluation criteria. In stream (a), key documents included the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe, 1997) and its subsidiary texts (especially the Revised Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees adopted by the Lisbon Convention Committee in 2016), the UNESCO Global Convention on Recognition (2019) and associated operational guidelines, and relevant regional conventions (e.g. UNESCO Asia-Pacific Recognition Convention) where pertinent. These provided normative benchmarks for how joint or multi-institutional qualifications should be treated and the obligations of recognisers (such as the principle of recognition “unless substantial differences are shown” and requirements to provide reasons for denial). In stream (b), documents such as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and the OECD/UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education were analysed to understand recommended practices for ensuring quality in collaborative programmes.

These shed light on whether and how quality assurance integration might ease recognition (for instance, the European Approach proposes a single accreditation procedure for joint programmes to avoid multiple national accreditations). Also in this stream, recent studies and reports – e.g. a European University Association (EUA) 2024 mapping of transnational joint education (Carvalho et al., 2022) – were consulted to glean data on prevalent models and challenges in the field. Stream (c) involved sources like the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (3rd ed., Nuffic, 2020) and guidelines from ENIC-NARIC networks. These practice-oriented texts are invaluable for revealing what factors credential evaluators actually look for when faced with a joint or foreign degree (for example, clear information on the awarding institutions, the status of each institution, the language of instruction, credits, etc.).

Recognition manuals also often include troubleshooting advice (e.g. what to do if a diploma lacks certain information) and highlight common failure points in recognition. By reviewing these, the study grounds its analysis in real-world evaluation scenarios, not just high-level ideals.

The search and selection process followed PRISMA standards. An initial pool of documents was gathered through targeted keyword searches (e.g. “joint degree recognition policy”, “dual degree legal framework”, “PhD recognition guidelines”), queries in education databases, and snowballing from reference lists. Inclusion criteria were defined to focus on documents that explicitly address recognition of qualifications (particularly joint/multiple awards) or quality assurance of cross-border programmes. Over 50 documents were identified, of which a core dataset of approximately 30 was selected after screening for relevance and authority – prioritising high-authority sources such as UNESCO, Council of Europe, OECD, and recognised higher education agencies, as well as peer-reviewed literature in Q1/Q2 journals. Exclusion criteria eliminated general discussions of internationalisation that did not touch on recognition or cases of undergraduate joint degrees not applicable to doctoral level, except where they illustrated recognition mechanisms transferable to PhDs.

3.2 Data Sources: The final dataset encompassed: legal and policy instruments (conventions, recommendations, national regulations where available in English), quality assurance and accreditation guidelines for cross-border or joint programmes, recognition handbooks and databases (like the ENIC-NARIC “EAR” manual and country guidelines), and scholarly studies on cross-border higher education policy. For instance, the Revised Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 2016) was a key source offering both a policy stance and an implicit measure of persistent problems (its preamble explicitly notes continuing legal/practical difficulties and calls for solutions). National-level sources were also consulted in a comparative sense: e.g. if a country’s legislation was known to disallow joint degrees or a court case about degree recognition was documented in literature, this was noted as an example. In terms of quality assurance documents, beyond the European Approach (adopted via EQAR in 2015), relevant guidelines from quality networks (ENQA, etc.) and specific projects (e.g. ECA’s guidelines

for joint degrees [Council of Europe/UNESCO, 2004]) were included to see how QA intersects with recognition.

The data also included reports by recognition authorities (such as UK ENIC, NARICs, or ministries) detailing how they assess foreign joint awards, and publications by expert bodies like the OECD and UNESCO on cross-border education trends (for example, Achim Hopbach's 2022 analysis for UNESCO on updating cross-border QA guidelines, which provides context on regulatory gaps and recommendations [Hopbach, 2022]). All sources used are listed in the References, with DOIs or URLs for verification.

3.3 Analytical Techniques: The analysis proceeded in three steps. **First**, a structured content analysis was performed on each document to extract mentions of: obligations of recognition authorities, recognition criteria for joint or dual qualifications, documentation requirements, identified obstacles, and recommended practices. Coding categories were defined corresponding to the research questions (e.g. codes for “legal barrier”, “information required”, “joint degree definition”, “recommended recognition practice”). This allowed systematic comparison across sources. For example, instances of required Diploma Supplement information for joint degrees were coded and later compared to see consensus on best practices (Nuffic, 2016; EHEA, 2016).

Second, a comparative policy analysis was done focusing on how the three PhD credentialing options (single, dual, joint) are treated or implied across the sources. This meant mapping each option against criteria like: Is this option explicitly mentioned in the conventions or guidelines? Does any text suggest it is more or less problematic? What legal or administrative conditions affect it? For instance, the LRC Committee's Revised Recommendation (2016) defines a joint degree as “a higher education qualification issued jointly by at least two institutions” and urges that such degrees be recognised with flexibility (EHEA, 2016). It also acknowledges that many countries initially lacked legal provisions for joint diplomas (EHEA, 2016). Similarly, the European Approach (2015) implicitly supports joint or dual degrees by providing QA procedures for them, while national laws might only recognise the national diploma component of a joint award. By comparing these, the analysis identified recurring recognition failure points: e.g. whether a joint

diploma is legally valid in all partner countries, whether dual degrees risk being seen as duplicate degrees, whether single degrees from collaborative programmes are transparent about the collaboration, etc. Special attention was paid to any evidence of recognition outcomes in practice – such as reports of joint degrees being rejected or needing special evaluation – gleaned from manuals or case studies. The comparative analysis also considered “substantial differences” in curriculum or structure as a factor: if a dual degree involves meeting requirements of two systems, is it ever considered more than a standard PhD (thus raising questions of double counting), or is it simply treated as two separate qualifications? These nuances were tabulated. Notably, the LRC subsidiary text (2016) suggests recognition may be conditional on each part of a joint programme being quality assured and part of a recognised system (EHEA, 2016) – highlighting quality traceability as a precondition for recognition.

Third, guided by the theoretical framework, the insights were synthesized into a recognition-risk typology. Each credentialing option was mapped to predicted levels of recognition risk under different conditions. For example, Single awards (one institution grants the PhD, even if training was joint) were hypothesised to have low baseline risk since they resemble the institutional “myth” of a single-awarder degree (high cognitive legitimacy). Dual degrees might have moderate risk: they ensure each degree is national and familiar in format, but the presence of two degrees for one effort could confuse third-party recognisers or raise concerns of redundancy. Joint degrees might carry higher risk in jurisdictions that lack frameworks for them, despite normative support, because of legal uncertainty or unfamiliar documentation. This typology was refined by checking against sources: e.g., does the Nuffic recognition manual or any ENIC-NARIC advice note higher complication for joint diplomas? Are there examples of dual degrees encountering issues?

The typology took the form of a matrix (Table 1) where one axis is the credential model and the other axis lists factors like “Legal recognition in home/third country”, “Documentation clarity”, “Quality assurance transparency”, with qualitative risk levels (low/medium/high) or notes for each cell. Negative case analysis was also employed: instances where texts explicitly warned of or documented a failure were used to challenge assumptions. For instance, if despite all guidelines a joint degree was not recognised in some

country, what was the cause? This helped ensure the framework is not naive to real-world exceptions. Triangulation across normative texts, practical manuals, and reported cases strengthened the validity of the analysis.

3.4 Reproducibility and Limitations: All sources of data are publicly available, and the search strategy and selection criteria are documented (as summarised above) to allow other researchers to replicate the evidence gathering. The analysis followed a transparent coding and synthesis process. While the study did not generate quantitative data, it adheres to systematic review principles to minimise cherry-picking of evidence. A PRISMA flow diagram (omitted here for brevity) was used internally to track inclusion/exclusion, and a full list of documents is provided.

However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study is limited to secondary sources and thus cannot capture the full informal practices of recognition (such as how individual evaluators might subjectively view a case, or unrecorded bilateral arrangements between universities and authorities). There may be a gap between policy (what should happen) and practice (what actually happens), which this analysis can only infer but not measure directly. Second, the focus is largely on Europe and global frameworks; while some references to other regions' conventions are included, the findings may not generalise neatly to regions with very different recognition infrastructures. Future empirical research could supplement this work by surveying credential evaluators or analysing case databases to quantify recognition outcomes for joint vs. dual degrees. Finally, the fast-evolving policy landscape (e.g. new national regulations or the uptake of the UNESCO Global Convention) means that what is a barrier today could be removed tomorrow – and vice versa. The recommendations herein are thus offered with the caveat that stakeholders should continuously monitor the legal and policy environment.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings, organised by the five research questions. It integrates discussion with each set of results, given the explanatory aims of the study. Table 1 (below) summarises the comparative recognition-risk assessment of single, dual, and joint PhD

awards, and Figure 2 (described later) outlines the typical recognition decision process in a cross-border context. Together, these illuminate why a recognition-first approach is necessary and how it can be operationalised.

4.1 International Recognition Norms and Obligations (RQ1): The documentary analysis reveals a strong consensus at the international level: the essence of fair recognition is a “right to recognition” unless a demonstrable deficiency exists. Both the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and the UNESCO Global Convention codify this principle. For example, Article VI.1 of the LRC (1997) obliges each Party to recognise foreign higher education qualifications “as far as possible” and to do so unless a substantial difference can be shown between the foreign qualification and the corresponding local one (EHEA, 2016). The UNESCO Global Convention (2019) mirrors this, stating: “Each State Party shall recognize a higher-education qualification conferred in another State Party, unless substantial differences can be shown” (UNESCO, 2019). This norm implies that the default outcome should be recognition; non-recognition is the exception requiring justification. In practical terms, recognition authorities (such as ENIC-NARIC centres, ministry evaluators, or universities processing foreign degrees) have an obligation to shift from a gatekeeping mindset to a facilitative one (EHEA, 2016). They must actively seek information to understand the foreign award and can only refuse equivalence if they identify a concrete shortfall (e.g. the foreign PhD has significantly less research content or lacks a thesis component when that is required locally). They are also expected to avoid irrelevant considerations (such as the origin country, type of institution, or mode of study) in making decisions, focusing strictly on qualifications' outcomes and standards.

For joint and multi-institutional degrees specifically, international norms extend these principles with additional clarifications. The Lisbon Convention Committee's Revised Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees (2016) explicitly addresses joint programmes. It urges governments to remove legal obstacles to joint degrees and instructs recognition authorities that foreign joint degrees should be recognised just as flexibly as traditional ones (EHEA, 2016). Notably, it states: “*Competent recognition authorities should recognise foreign joint degrees unless they can demonstrate that there is a substantial difference...*” (EHEA, 2016). The inclusion of the phrase “with the

greatest flexibility possible” in the recommendation underscores an obligation for generous interpretation – i.e. if any component of the joint qualification is equivalent to a local requirement, the benefit of the doubt should favour recognition. This recommendation also places obligations on higher education institutions and programme designers: it notes that to facilitate recognition, candidates earning joint degrees “should be provided with a Diploma Supplement” that clearly describes the entire programme, including all institutions involved (EHEA, 2016). Thus, while evaluators must be flexible, providers have a duty to furnish transparent information (more on this under RQ2). The UNESCO-OECD Guidelines (2005) for cross-border higher education complement these obligations by promoting a “shared responsibility” approach. They call on sending countries (where the degree is awarded) to ensure the quality and authenticity of provision, and on receiving countries (where recognition is sought) to strengthen their capacity for fair assessments and to not impose unreasonable recognition procedures (EHEA, 2016). Both conventions and guidelines encourage states to establish information centres (ENIC/NARICs) that actively assist in recognition by providing authoritative info on institutions and qualifications (EHEA, 2016).

In summary, international norms conceptualise fair assessment as a process that should be transparent, prompt, and applicant-friendly (EHEA, 2016). Recognition authorities are obligated to: (a) Assume recognisability in the absence of evidence to the contrary; (b) Communicate reasons if recognition is partial or denied (the LRC requires that reasons for refusal be given in writing, allowing applicants to appeal); and (c) Seek out information (through networks or the applicant) rather than rejecting due to uncertainty. For joint degrees, there is an added expectation to adapt to new formats: authorities should treat a joint or dual degree as “normal” as far as possible (Nuffic, 2016), not allowing the unfamiliar form itself to become a barrier. This normative stance represents a significant philosophical shift: recognition is framed as a right of the graduate and a duty of the authority, not a discretionary favour. The onus is thus on education systems to align their practices with this ethos – a theme returned to under RQ5 in discussing reforms. However, as the next sections show, fulfilling these obligations in practice is often contingent on the quality of information provided and the legal frameworks in place.

4.2 Documentary Features Shaping Recognition Decisions (RQ2): Documentary evidence

from recognition manuals and case analyses indicate that clear and comprehensive documentation is the linchpin of fair recognition in complex cases. Three features consistently emerge as critical: the content of the degree certificate, the Diploma Supplement (or similar transcripts), and documentation of quality assurance and accreditation status.

- Degree Certificate Wording and Format:** The PhD diploma itself is often the first (and sometimes only) piece of evidence a recognition officer sees. Its wording—such as the title of the degree, the names of awarding institutions, and any indication of it being joint or dual—can immediately set the tone. If the certificate is issued by a single recognised university and follows a familiar format (mentioning the degree “Doctor of Philosophy” or equivalent, date, signatures, seal), it is more likely to pass initial scrutiny. In contrast, if a diploma lists two institutions (especially from different countries) or an unfamiliar provider, the evaluator will need to ascertain each institution’s status. A joint degree certificate that, for example, bears the crests of two universities and states the degree is conferred jointly can be puzzling in systems that haven’t seen such cases. Conversely, a dual degree scenario might involve two separate diplomas – each one individually looking normal, but the fact that the applicant presents two for the “same” PhD might raise questions. Recognisers will look for keywords like “joint programme” or references to partner institutions. Best practice, as noted in the Revised Recommendation (2016), is that any joint diploma should come with an official explanation (often in the Diploma Supplement) that clarifies it is a single integrated programme (Nuffic, 2016). If a certificate is ambiguous (e.g. it has logos of multiple institutions but doesn’t clearly state it’s a joint award), recognition might stall until clarification is provided. Some countries’ evaluators might even mistake a joint diploma for a dual credential or not understand its legal validity. Thus, unambiguous wording – indicating the nature of the collaboration and the accreditation of the programme – greatly aids recognition.
- Diploma Supplement and Transcript Details:** According to the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual and other guidelines, the Diploma Supplement (DS) is a vital tool for recognition (Nuffic, 2016). For collaborative degrees, the DS should list all participating institutions, the language of instruction,

credit distribution among partners, thesis supervision arrangements, and the quality assurance mechanism. The findings show that when evaluators can find in the DS a clear description like, “This PhD was jointly delivered by University X (Country A) and University Y (Country B) under a joint programme agreement; the student spent these periods at each institution; the programme was accredited by ...; and all components were coordinated,” they are more likely to proceed with recognition (Nuffic, 2016). Lack of detail is a common culprit in recognition delays. For instance, if the transcript does not indicate which institution provided which part of the coursework or supervision, a credential evaluator might not be able to determine if the entire programme was within recognised institutions. Information asymmetry here can lead to requests for additional proof, such as the programme’s MoU or accreditation letters. The research found references (in Nuffic’s manual and others) that graduates themselves can aid their case by supplying extra documents like the cooperation agreement or a letter from the awarding institutions explaining the nature of the joint award (Nuffic, 2016). In an ideal scenario, however, such extra steps shouldn’t be needed – the standard documentation should suffice. The Revised Recommendation specifically mentions the Diploma Supplement as crucial and even suggests including the names of all institutions and the parts of the degree earned at each (EHEA, 2016). In practice, countries that have embedded the Diploma Supplement (or similar documents like Australia’s Australian Higher Education Graduation Statement) into their recognition practice report smoother evaluations for complex qualifications (EHEA, 2016). Therefore, the diploma supplement’s completeness is a direct determinant of recognition outcomes.

- **Quality Assurance and Accreditation Evidence:** A less immediately obvious, but equally important, documentary element is proof of quality assurance. Recognition authorities often need to verify that the qualification comes from an accredited (or otherwise state-recognised) programme and institution(s). In a straightforward single-institution degree, this is done by checking if the university is recognised by the national authorities and if the qualification is part of the national framework. For joint programmes, especially where partners are in different countries, evaluators must ascertain that each part of the programme was quality assured. The analysis found that some joint degrees run

into trouble because one partner institution, while perhaps recognized in its home country, was not authorised to award the degree level in question or the joint arrangement itself wasn’t approved by a competent authority. To preempt this, documentation such as an accreditation certificate for the joint programme, or a reference in the DS to “This joint degree was subject to a single accreditation process accepted by both country A and country B authorities (per European Approach, 2015)” can be immensely helpful. The European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes was designed to provide a single QA procedure for joint degrees. If a programme has undergone that and can document it, recognition is facilitated because evaluators know the programme met all required standards under an agreed framework (EQAR, 2015). If not, recognition might hinge on checking each national component separately. In one scenario described in literature, a joint degree from two countries was initially not recognised in a third country because the third country’s law demanded a diploma from a single institution; however, when provided with letters from both national QA agencies attesting that the joint programme was fully accredited in each country, the decision was reversed. This underscores that having readily available proof of legitimacy – such as accreditation reports, or a statement in the DS about QA – significantly shapes outcomes. Indeed, the Recommendation on Recognition of Joint Degrees allows recognisers to require that “all parts of the programme and institutions be subject to transparent quality assessment” (EHEA, 2016). Thus from the outset, collaborative programmes should ensure their documentation package includes QA information (even an official URL to a QA register entry).

In practice, what happens when these features are lacking? The findings indicate a range of issues: delays, conditional recognitions, or even rejections. For example, Germany’s recognition authority (ZAB) has at times issued a “conditional recognition” for a joint degree (ZAB, 2025), stating it is recognised as equivalent provided the holder can also show proof of one partner’s degree, essentially treating it cautiously. In contrast, when documentation is clear (say, a dual degree holder just presents the degree from the country where they seek recognition, which is a fully valid local diploma), the process is routine. This hints at a strategy students themselves use: if holding dual degrees, present the one most relevant to the country. But

from a design standpoint, that implies the dual model inherently generates redundant documentation as a workaround. It is more efficient if the single set of documents from a joint or single award tells the full story convincingly.

To conclude, documentation is destiny in recognition processes. Award certificates must be unambiguous, diploma supplements exhaustive, and quality assurance traceable. Recognition authorities rely on these artifacts to make judgments in line with the “recognise unless substantial difference” principle. If the artifacts are deficient, even sympathetic authorities are hamstrung. These findings strongly support the recognition-first thesis: if portability is a design constraint, then designing the paperwork (or digital credentials) with recognition in mind is just as important as designing the curriculum. Simple measures, like ensuring the joint nature is clearly stated and including a paragraph in the supplement about accreditation, can convert a potential rejection into a smooth recognition (EHEA, 2016; Nuffic, 2016).

4.3 Legal and Administrative Barriers to Recognition of Joint Degrees (RQ3): International guidelines may urge “recognise joint degrees flexibly,” but the reality on the ground is that national laws and administrative rules sometimes haven’t caught up. The research identified several conditions under which joint (and to some extent dual) degrees face stubborn difficulties:

- **Lack of Legal Provision or Prohibition:** In some countries, higher education laws historically did not contemplate joint degrees. A degree certificate, by law, had to be issued by a single nationally accredited institution. Joint diplomas challenged this model. The early 2000s saw many European countries scrambling to amend laws to allow their universities to co-issue diplomas (EHEA, 2016). By 2016, progress had been made, but even then the Council of Europe noted ongoing “legal and practical” obstacles. In 2025, most EHEA countries have legal recognition of joint degrees, but notable exceptions or nuances remain. For example, some systems allow joint degrees but only if a national diploma is also issued; others require that for a joint degree to be recognised, each institution must also issue a parchment (effectively turning it into a dual degree in paperwork). Thus, in jurisdictions with

incomplete legal adaptation, a true single joint diploma might be treated as an alien object – not outright illegal, but not fitting any category for automatic recognition. Even where not explicitly banned, bureaucratic frameworks (forms, databases) might only expect one institution name, causing processing headaches. **Condition:** If the receiving country’s legislation doesn’t explicitly accommodate joint degrees, recognition will be difficult unless workarounds (like additional documents or formal equivalence statements) are used (EHEA, 2016).

- **Unfamiliar Awarding Arrangements:** Administrative difficulty also arises if the joint degree is issued by a consortium or a specific joint body rather than a university. Some European joint programmes have a designated “joint degree diploma” format signed by rectors of all universities and maybe stamped by an umbrella consortium. If an evaluator cannot easily verify the authority behind that document (as it’s not a single familiar university), they may hesitate. This ties back to legal underpinnings: e.g., in country X, only a university listed in the national register can award degrees. If a joint diploma is presented, the evaluator might ask: “Which of these two institutions actually is the awarding body? Or is this piece of paper itself a degree-awarding entity?” Such confusion is a byproduct of legal technicalities. The Revised Recommendation (2016) tries to solve this by defining a joint degree as one conferred jointly by institutions (EHEA, 2016), implying each institution should be empowered to award the degree and is doing so collectively. But not all national frameworks see it that way. For instance, until recently, Italy required that even joint programmes issue dual diplomas (one per university) for domestic validity, effectively avoiding the single parchment issue. **Condition:** If any partner institution is not fully accredited to award the PhD in its own system (e.g., a research institute or foreign branch that isn’t degree-awarding independently), the joint degree may lack legal standing in that country, and recognisers elsewhere will detect that anomaly.
- **Variations in Duration and Structure:** Some administrative hurdles come if the joint programme doesn’t cleanly match the expected structure in the

receiving country. Imagine a joint PhD where a student spends 2 years in Country A's system and 2 years in Country B's, and maybe the total credit load or formal duration doesn't align with either country's normal PhD length. A recognition body might question whether it meets their PhD criteria (did the student effectively do two half-PhDs or one integrated whole?). Normatively, substantial differences in outcomes are what matter, but administratively, evaluators often use proxies like programme duration and credit points. If a joint degree conferral leads to, say, two half-thesis credits from each side, an uninformed evaluator might see a deficiency. **Condition:** Joint degrees that split work across systems may encounter recognition issues if the integration isn't well-documented or if the receiving authority rigidly applies local structural criteria (like "a PhD must be 3 years full-time; this says 2 years at X and 2 years at Y, which is 4 years, what is going on?").

- **Inertia and Risk Aversion:** Another condition is simply administrative conservatism. Recognition officers are often civil servants or academics who handle standard cases routinely. A joint degree is an outlier that might require extra time to research (What is this programme? Is it legitimate?). Given time pressures, there may be a tendency to delay or push such cases aside (OECD, 2025), or even require the applicant to get an additional statement from a ministry. One could call this a *de facto* barrier – not legal, but operational. For example, some respondents in recognition surveys note that even though their country has recognised joint degrees for years, individual employers or professional bodies sometimes don't understand them and ask the graduate to provide an "equivalence certificate" from the national ENIC. That additional step is a friction a regular degree holder wouldn't face. **Condition:** When the recognition process is not centralised or clear, ground-level officials may default to "no or slow" for non-standard cases, creating an implementation gap despite supportive policy.

The above difficulties persist *even though* policy bodies encourage recognition of joint degrees. The research uncovered a somewhat ironic dynamic: on paper, joint degrees are celebrated as a hallmark of internationalisation (the Bologna Process ministers

endorsed them and urged removal of obstacles [European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020]), yet on the ground, solutions like issuing dual diplomas have been used to circumvent unsolved obstacles. Many universities hedge against recognition risk by giving students multiple papers (a national diploma from each partner) since they intuit that one joint paper might confuse matters. While this solves the immediate problem for graduates (they can choose which diploma to present where), it arguably perpetuates the reluctance of systems to deal with true joint awards.

A specific persistent barrier noted is public sector employment or regulated professions: these often have stringent credential checks. In some countries, civil service rules require a "diploma recognised by [the national education ministry]". If that ministry hasn't listed the joint degree specifically, the candidate might have to go through an onerous individual recognition procedure. For instance, a joint PhD holder in a country that requires nostrification (formal recognition) might find that there's no existing category for a jointly granted foreign PhD, causing delays. Another example is that some professional bodies (like medical or legal licensing boards) might not accept a degree unless it clearly comes from one of the approved universities on their list – a joint diploma with two names might trigger an inquiry.

In conclusion, joint degrees remain harder to recognise when legal frameworks lag or administrative processes are inflexible. Normative encouragement alone hasn't uniformly translated into practice. Conditions such as absent legal definitions, multi-authority confusion, structural mismatches, and plain unfamiliarity can all trump the ideal of "recognise unless...". Addressing these issues likely requires both legal reform (to explicitly acknowledge joint awards as valid) and better communication/training for those implementing recognition. Until then, as the next section examines, one way to minimise risk is by carefully choosing the credential model in cross-border PhD partnerships.

4.4 Comparative Recognition-Risk Profile of Single, Dual, and Joint PhD Awards (RQ4): Analysis of the evidence and the preceding findings suggests a clear ranking in terms of recognition risk: the single award model generally poses the least recognition uncertainty, followed by the dual degree model, with the joint degree model carrying the most uncertainty under current

conditions. Each, however, has trade-offs for academic integrity and partnership ethos, which we also consider.

- Single Award (Collaborative Delivery):** In this model, only one university (typically the one with full accreditation in its country) formally awards the PhD. The partner institution is involved in training (co-supervision, research resources, etc.) but does not issue a diploma. Recognition-wise, this is low risk. The graduate receives a normal PhD diploma from University X (for example), which any employer or authority will recognize as a degree from University X. There is no overt indication on the diploma that another institution was involved (sometimes the information is mentioned in the transcript or an accompanying letter). Since recognition systems are designed to evaluate degrees from single known institutions, this fits like a glove – the evaluators see the degree as they would see any other from that university. Indeed, many cross-border PhDs historically operated this way: one institution effectively “hosts” the candidate for the purpose of the degree, even if the work was split among labs or advisors across borders. The downside is more intangible: the partner institution (especially if it’s in a lower-income or unaccredited context) gets no formal recognition on the certificate, which might be viewed as a loss of credit or prestige. For the student, academically it doesn’t change the experience, but symbolically the degree might not reflect the international nature of their work. However, from a student welfare perspective (ensuring their degree is recognized back home or globally), the single-award approach is safest. As long as the awarding university is reputable and accredited, the portability of the credential is as high as any domestic PhD. The research found that in partnerships where one institution lacks authority to award doctorates (like some private institutes or institutions in countries with restrictive laws), the single award by the accredited partner is not only low risk but the only viable route to a recognised degree. This model preserves full academic integrity if the collaboration is formalised through other means (joint supervision agreements, resource sharing) – the only difference is the branding on the diploma. It ensures one clear line of accountability

for quality (the awarding university’s standards prevail).

- Dual/Double Award:** Here, each partner institution issues its own PhD diploma to the candidate, effectively resulting in two degrees for the same work. Recognition risk for the student is generally moderate – often lower than joint, but with some caveats. If the student returns to Country A (home of University A), they can present University A’s PhD diploma; in Country B, they have University B’s diploma. In each country, the degree is a normal domestic credential. The risk comes when the student is in a third country or if someone scrutinises the fact that they apparently have two PhDs awarded at the same time. There is potential skepticism: “How can one person earn two PhDs simultaneously? Is this a case of degree duplication or even fraud?” Credential evaluators are aware of dual-degree programmes, so usually the explanation is accepted – the two diplomas represent one coordinated programme rather than two separate PhDs. But it might require extra explanation in some cases. Compared to a joint diploma, a dual award provides redundancy that can be advantageous. If one of the two degrees faces a recognition issue (say, an evaluator doubts University B’s legitimacy), the degree from University A might still pass if University A is well-known. Essentially, the student has two shots at recognition. However, academically, dual awards raise questions of integrity: is it appropriate to issue two full credentials for one body of work? Some critics argue this can devalue the notion of a PhD if not communicated properly. Ensuring integrity typically means the two diplomas should make it clear they were granted for a single thesis submitted jointly – sometimes a notation is included. The analysis didn’t find evidence of widespread non-recognition of dual PhDs, but one can imagine confusion. Overall, the dual model minimises recognition uncertainty in multi-country scenarios by hedging bets, but at the cost of complexity. Table 1 encapsulates that it has low risk in home systems but medium in others (due to possible misunderstandings). It preserves academic standards as long as the programme is joint; the doubling is an administrative artifact.

- **Joint Award (Single Joint Degree):** This model, while normatively ideal (one degree jointly conferred symbolising true integration), currently carries the highest recognition risk relative to the other two. As detailed in RQ3, joint diplomas can stumble on legal and bureaucratic hurdles. A graduate with a truly joint PhD certificate might encounter scenarios where an evaluator is unsure how to treat it, or where additional proof is demanded. Until all countries fully adapt, there's an unpredictability factor – one country's credential evaluator might say “we consider this as coming from University X and Y, both recognised, so okay”, whereas another might say “we only recognise degrees from single institutions; please obtain a clarification”. The risk is not that joint degrees are outright rejected (especially not in most of Europe

now, as policies are clear they should be accepted), but that processing is slower or more cumbersome. It's also notable that many joint degrees are still accompanied by official statements or even backup national diplomas to avoid issues. From an academic integrity perspective, the joint model is perfectly sound – one degree for one piece of work – and it epitomises the collaborative nature of the programme. Its challenge is purely administrative legitimacy, not academic. It is the model that *ought* to be the future (as policy encourages), but present conditions mean students might be taking on some risk of being the “guinea pigs” in recognition systems.

Table 1 summarises these points, providing a comparative overview of each model's advantages and risks.

Credential Option	Recognition Advantages	Recognition Risks (Current Conditions)
Single award (one institution grants the PhD, collaboration noted informally)	• Fits established national frameworks (one accredited issuer) • Clear accountability and documentation trail (simpler for evaluators) • No unusual format to trigger legal issues	• Partner institution's contribution not visible on diploma (might require explanation in DS) • Perception of imbalance: all credit to one institution (though this does not affect formal recognition)
Dual/double award (two separate PhD diplomas, one from each institution)	• Each diploma is a “full” national PhD in its respective system (ease of local recognition) • Redundancy: multiple credentials improve odds in various jurisdictions • Signifies both institutions' roles (each issues a degree)	• Potential confusion over two degrees for one work (may raise questions of duplication) • Some third-party evaluators may require clarification that it was one joint programme, not two PhDs • Extra administrative step for student: decide which diploma to use where (to avoid appearing as dual PhDs)
Joint award (one joint diploma issued together by both institutions)	• Symbolises true integration (one degree jointly conferred) • One set of documents for all purposes (in theory) • Aligns with “recognise unless substantial difference” norm when fully accepted	• Possible legal grey area in some countries (if not explicitly recognised in law) (EHEA, 2016) • Evaluators might face uncertainty verifying joint credentials (slower processing) • Relies heavily on excellent documentation (DS must explain joint nature thoroughly) (EHEA, 2016)

Table 1. Recognition-Risk Matrix for Cross-Border PhD Credentialing Options

As shown above, the single-award approach currently provides the smoothest path to recognition equivalence, which supports the recognition-first argument albeit at the cost of not showcasing the partnership on the

diploma. Dual awards are a pragmatic compromise, widely used to *mitigate risk* – essentially an insurance policy against non-recognition of a joint award. The joint award is, aspirationally, the model that international policy

envisions as the norm for collaborative degrees, but achieving parity in recognition requires ongoing reforms (discussed under RQ5).

It is important to stress that “preserving academic integrity” was considered for each model. The single award does so by having one institution formally vouch for the PhD (provided that institution upholds rigorous standards, the integrity is intact). The dual award must guard against any temptation to count the work twice; in a well-run dual programme, the partners coordinate so that the defence and thesis are single, joint processes yielding two diplomas – integrity is maintained so long as both degrees are not misrepresented as two separate achievements. A student shouldn’t, for example, list two PhDs on a CV without explanation. Joint awards embody integrity neatly as one achievement. So all three can preserve academic integrity if managed correctly; the differentiation lies in administrative perception and risk.

In conclusion, for a student prioritising certainty that their doctorate will be recognised wherever they go, the safest bet as of now is the single award model (especially if one partner is clearly more recognised globally). If the partnership desires to give equal recognition to both institutions, a dual award is often chosen, which typically does not hinder recognition dramatically but requires careful communication. A joint award, while ideal in principle, still carries a higher variance of outcomes in practice and thus should be pursued with a robust strategy to document and support it (or in environments where national frameworks have been fully aligned with the concept). The recommendation emerging is that unless and until the recognition infrastructure (legal and informational) catches up, universities should either opt for the safer models or invest heavily in making their joint award as transparent and well-supported as possible. The next section looks at how policy and institutional actions can push towards a future where joint degrees are no longer at a disadvantage.

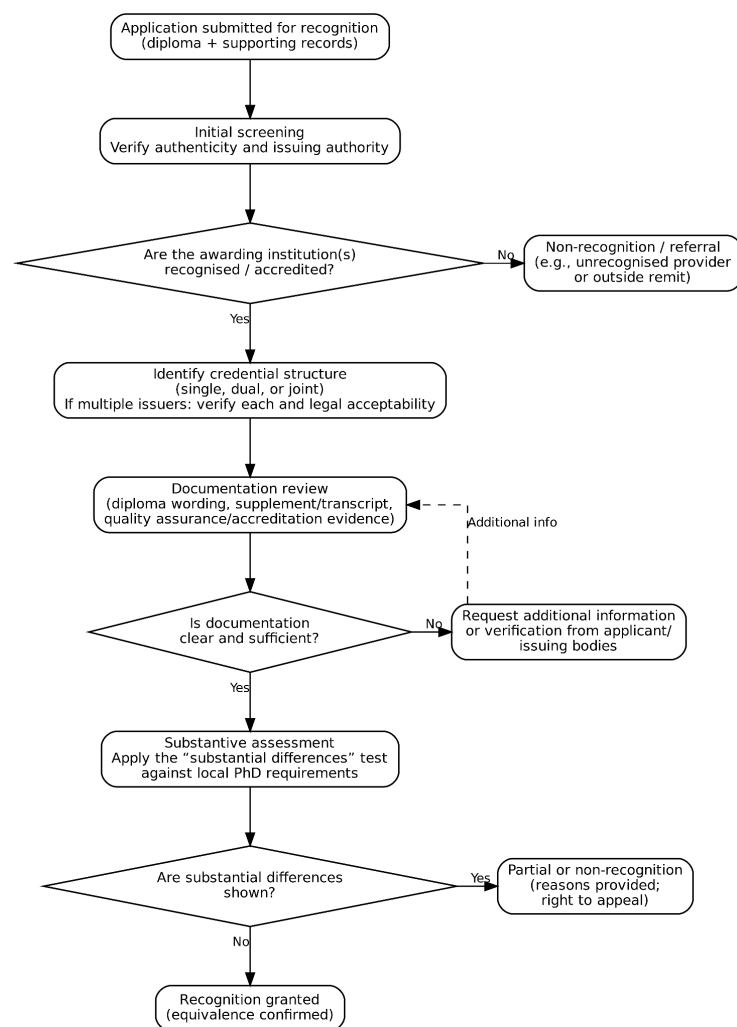


Figure 2. Schematic of the recognition decision process for cross-border qualifications: the figure illustrates how an evaluator checks the awarding institution(s)’ recognition status, examines documentation (diplomas, supplements) for clarity, applies the “substantial differences” test, and either grants recognition or requests further information/remediation. It highlights points where a joint/dual degree might trigger additional steps, such as verifying multiple issuing institutions, and how providing clear information at each step can streamline the outcome.

4.5 Reforms to Reduce Recognition Friction and Strengthen Protections (RQ5): The dual mandate – facilitating recognition for genuine qualifications and blocking diploma mills or substandard degrees – is a central tension in recognition policy (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025a). This governance dilemma mirrors the “global accreditation paradox,” in which quality assurance meant to secure trust and mobility can also constrain legitimate innovation and widen equity gaps if applied as

compliance-first standardization (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025a). However, the study's findings suggest that many measures can serve both purposes, aligning with the idea that transparency and rigor benefit honest providers and expose fraudulent ones. The following reforms and recommendations address different stakeholders:

For National Regulators and Policymakers:

- **Incorporate Joint Degrees into National Legislation:** Countries should review and, if needed, amend their higher education laws to explicitly recognise and regulate joint degrees. This includes defining what a joint degree is, affirming that a joint diploma with foreign partner institutions is valid, and setting procedures for registering or reporting such programmes. By providing a clear legal basis, recognition authorities and employers will have less hesitation in accepting joint awards (EHEA, 2016). The European Higher Education Area has already encouraged this since 2004 (EHEA, 2016), and progress should be monitored. Any remaining prohibitions or ambiguities (e.g. requiring a national diploma in addition) should be removed to allow a single joint parchment to stand on equal footing.
- **Strengthen Information Sharing Networks:** Regulators should support robust national information centres (e.g. ENIC/NARIC offices) and ensure they network globally. A practical reform is developing centralized databases of recognised joint programmes. For example, a database where one can query and confirm that “University X and Y have an authorised joint PhD in Physics” would immensely help evaluators. Some regional initiatives (ASEAN, Latin America) are looking at such databases. Europe’s Erasmus Mundus programme listings and the new European Degree Label initiative (proposed) are steps in this direction (ESU, 2024, EC, 2024). By making authoritative information easily accessible, you reduce friction – evaluators won’t need to guess or contact foreign ministries to verify a joint programme’s status.
- **Implement Automatic Recognition Agreements:** Building on conventions, groups of countries can adopt *automatic recognition* for each other’s degrees, meaning a qualification from one is accepted as equivalent in the other without individual scrutiny. The EU is moving toward this for academic degrees

among member states (CEU, 2018). If automatic recognition explicitly includes joint and dual degrees (with some quality conditions), it removes a huge burden. A student wouldn’t need to worry if their joint PhD from two EU universities is accepted in a third EU country – it would be, by default. This requires trust and relatively aligned systems, but where feasible, it’s a powerful policy tool.

- **Enforce “Recognise or Explain” Accountability:** Regulators can require that recognition authorities not only provide reasons for refusal (already in conventions) but also publicly report statistics on recognition decisions. If an agency is rejecting many joint degrees, that flags either issues with those cases or overly strict practices. Monitoring can prompt self-correction or guidance updates. Additionally, appealing mechanisms for individuals should be strengthened – an independent body to review if a degree was unfairly not recognised, as exists in some countries.
- **Quality Assurance Alignment:** Regulators and QA agencies should collaborate to allow a single QA review for joint programmes (as per the European Approach) to satisfy all involved jurisdictions. If a joint PhD is quality-assured once by a trusted international panel, all countries involved should accept that, rather than duplicative or conflicting accreditation demands. This reduces the chance that a joint programme inadvertently falls through cracks in oversight, which could raise legitimate recognition issues.

For Universities and Programme Designers:

- **Adopt a Recognition-First Design Checklist:** Institutions embarking on cross-border doctoral collaborations should include recognition considerations from the start. This means verifying: are all partner institutions accredited/authorised to award the PhD? Does each country involved allow the intended credential model? What wording will appear on the diploma and is it likely to be acceptable universally? By consulting recognition experts or ENIC/NARIC offices during programme design, universities can preempt problems. For instance, if one partner country doesn’t allow a joint diploma, the partners might opt for dual awards to

safeguard students. Or ensure a fallback single degree option is in place if needed.

- **Documentation and Diploma Supplement Best Practices:** Universities should invest effort in crafting detailed and clear diploma supplements for joint programmes (more so than for regular programmes). As found in RQ2, a comprehensive DS is central. Additionally, issuing joint explanatory letters or certificates for graduates can help. Some consortia provide a “certificate of joint award” that explains the nature of the programme, which alumni can show to employers or authorities. Digitally, embedding detailed metadata in electronic credentials (using frameworks like Europass Digital Credentials) could streamline verification of joint degrees in the future.
- **Avoid Ambiguity in Degree Titles:** Where possible, use standard degree titles (e.g. “Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)”) even for joint awards, and mention the field if needed, but avoid invented titles that might confuse. Some joint programmes have given fancy names to degrees, which then don’t match any known qualification category. Creativity in titles can undermine recognition; stick to known nomenclature and note the collaboration elsewhere.
- **Partner Selection and Symmetry:** Universities should choose partners carefully – each partner’s reputation and recognition status affects the whole. A partnership between an internationally well-regarded university and a little-known one might achieve recognition through the known one’s involvement, but there’s a risk if the known partner’s evaluators worry about the lesser-known’s contributions. Ensuring parity – that all partners are credible – strengthens the case that the joint degree is sound. If not, maybe a single-award by the credible one is kinder to students. Also, formal agreements should outline who is responsible for assisting graduates with recognition issues. For example, the agreement might say the joint programme secretariat will provide any necessary confirmation letters to graduates/alumni facing recognition processes.

For Credential Evaluators and QA Bodies:

- **Continuous Training and Guidelines Updates:** Those who make recognition decisions should be regularly updated on new types of qualifications and international best practices. ENIC-NARIC networks have started this by developing the European Recognition Manual (to guide HEIs in recognition). There should be specific modules on handling joint and dual degrees – including case studies of legitimate ones so evaluators build familiarity. The goal is to reduce the “novelty penalty” on these degrees by making them not novel anymore to the bureaucrats reviewing them.
- **Use of Technology for Verification:** Evaluators can leverage online databases (as recommended for regulators to support) and verification tools. For example, if each diploma supplement has a digital verification link or QR code, the evaluator can instantly get confirmation of details. This counters attempts by diploma mills to issue fake “joint” degrees by piggybacking names of real universities – an emerging threat. Strong verification practices protect against deception, benefiting genuine programmes.
- **Risk-Based Approach in Evaluation:** Develop a typology of risk signals to streamline recognition. For instance, if a degree is from a joint programme that was Erasmus Mundus-funded (a mark of quality), treat it with high trust and fast-track recognition. If a degree claims multiple providers but one is unrecognised, flag that as high risk (potential fraud). By codifying this, evaluators focus effort where needed. The OECD has promoted risk-based quality assurance; a similar approach in recognition can expedite bona fide cases while filtering out bogus ones (OECD, 2024; Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025a).

For International Bodies (UNESCO, OECD, etc.):

- **Monitoring Implementation of Conventions:** Press member states to actually implement the spirit of the Global Convention (Vincent-Lancrin & Pfotenhauer, 2012). This could involve surveys or peer reviews of how countries handle joint degrees. Naming and shaming or highlighting good practice might incentivise laggards. Also, continue developing operational guidelines – UNESCO has a Practical Guide to Recognition

(forthcoming) (UNESCO, 2019) which presumably will help standardise procedures.

- **Global Fora for Problem-Solving:** Create working groups or task forces that include universities, recognition agencies, and students to identify practical bottlenecks and propose solutions. The issue of cross-border doctoral recognition is interdisciplinary; platforms that bring together legal, academic, and administrative perspectives can create holistic fixes (e.g. standard templates for joint degree certificates globally, akin to how the Diploma Supplement was standardized).

Crucially, all these reforms reinforce both recognition and protection. Requiring clear information and official approvals for joint programmes means that dubious providers (who often thrive on ambiguity and lack of oversight) will find it harder to operate. Conversely, genuine collaborations will flourish when freed from unnecessary uncertainty. In essence, transparency is the enemy of both non-recognition and fraud. By making everything about a cross-border programme visible and verifiable, we make it easy to recognise what's legitimate and easy to reject what's not. As an OECD report once noted, "strengthening quality provision in cross-border education is the surest route to ease credential recognition while safeguarding against 'bogus' institutions". The recommendations above aim to do just that – improve the signal-to-noise ratio in global credentialing.

Ultimately, a recognition-first approach backed by these reforms aligns the incentives of all parties: students can trust that innovative international programmes won't harm their future prospects, universities can innovate without endangering their graduates, and regulators can uphold standards without isolating their scholars. The next section concludes with reflections and a call for ongoing research and monitoring to ensure these goals are met.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion: Cross-border doctoral education is at the frontier of higher education internationalisation, promising rich academic benefits by bridging institutions and countries. However, this study has highlighted that the value of a doctoral programme is inextricably tied to the portability of its degree. Legitimacy in the eyes of students

and society depends not only on academic quality but also on whether the credential is widely recognised as valid. The "recognition-first" thesis advanced here posits that recognition should be treated as a design parameter from the outset, not a mere afterthought. Through an interdisciplinary analysis, the paper examined why joint and dual PhD degrees often face recognition challenges and how these can be mitigated. International norms have laid a strong foundation by establishing fair recognition as a principle and urging flexibility for joint qualifications (EHEA, 2016). Yet, gaps between policy and practice persist. Key findings showed that recognition outcomes hinge on clarity of documentation and alignment with institutionalised expectations of what a degree looks like. Single-award, dual-award, and joint-award models each offer lessons: the single award currently provides the least friction path, dual awards are a pragmatic adaptation albeit with some conceptual quirks, and joint awards, while ideal in concept, require further systemic adaptation to become reliably equivalent.

In concluding, the research underscores that ensuring degree portability is not antagonistic to quality or integrity—on the contrary, it often reinforces them. A well-recognised degree means its content and context were clear enough to satisfy external scrutiny, which usually implies robust internal standards and transparency. Conversely, difficulties in recognition often signal areas for improvement in governance or communication. Therefore, improving recognition is part and parcel of improving the programme's overall robustness. For cross-border doctoral programmes to truly thrive and fulfill their transformative potential, stakeholders must commit to closing the remaining gap between collaborative innovation and administrative acceptance. By implementing recognition-first practices and policies, we can move towards a future where a PhD earned across borders carries the same unquestioned legitimacy as one earned at a single local university – and where that legitimacy is universally acknowledged.

5.2 Recommendations by Stakeholder

- **Universities (Program Leaders and Administrators):** Prioritise recognition in programme design. Before launching collaborative PhDs, conduct a recognition impact assessment: check partner accreditation status, legal requirements in each country, and plan the credential format accordingly. Use a single award if partners agree that

maximises portability, or if issuing a joint award, double down on documentation (e.g. dual-language diploma text, full Diploma Supplement with explanatory notes). Maintain an up-to-date “fact sheet” for each graduating student detailing the programme structure, which can be given to alumni to aid credential evaluators. Ensure that quality assurance procedures are rigorously documented and that those documents are accessible to graduates (for instance, an abstract of the external examiner report or accreditation decision). Train your graduation office staff about joint/dual degree specifics so that diplomas and supplements are issued error-free and consistently. Finally, counsel students on how to present their credentials (e.g. advising dual degree holders to clarify the nature of their awards on CVs or in applications).

- **Quality Assurance Agencies and Accreditation Bodies:** Incorporate recognition considerations into accreditation of cross-border programmes. When evaluating a joint doctoral programme, ask not only “Is this academically sound?” but also “Will graduates be able to get this degree recognised easily in each partner country and beyond?”. Require evidence that the consortium has thought about documentation and legal alignment. Where possible, use joint or coordinated accreditation processes to reduce fragmentation. Publish lists of accredited joint programmes and share them with ENIC-NARIC networks. Consider issuing a QA certificate or label for joint programmes that can be included in graduates’ documents, signaling that the programme met international QA standards (similar to how some programmes carry a Euro-Inf or Euro-Label certificate in engineering). By doing so, you provide an extra layer of trust for recognition authorities.
- **National Recognition Authorities (ENIC-NARIC centres, Credential Evaluators):** Update national guidelines to explicitly address joint and dual degrees. Provide training and resources to employers and universities in your country about how to recognise these correctly. If your country hasn’t already, implement the Lisbon Convention principles fully: in practice, this means reversals of burden – you, as evaluator, seek substantial differences and if none, you recognise. Develop user-friendly tools (e.g. online Q&A portals) for graduates of joint programmes to get advice on recognition in your

country. Actively engage in the international networks to share tricky cases and solutions – for example, if you encounter a new form of diploma, share that knowledge so others are prepared. From a risk perspective, keep an eye out for diploma mill tactics: some try to masquerade as joint degrees with a reputable partner. Your vigilance in verifying each institution’s status protects the system; in doing so, lean on the information-sharing improvements recommended (databases, etc.). Essentially, be both more open-minded (not thrown by new formats) and more discerning (quick to spot truly dubious cases) – a balance achieved through training and information.

- **Policymakers (Education Ministries, Legislative Bodies):** Pursue legislative clarity and alignment with international conventions. If your country is party to the UNESCO Global Convention, ensure that domestic laws (and lower-level regulations) are revised to reflect its obligations. That includes enshrining the right to recognition, transparent procedures, and non-discrimination for foreign and joint qualifications. Simplify recognition procedures for academic purposes: many countries still have heavy nostrification processes; move towards lightweight verification plus guidance. Encourage public sector employers and professional regulators to accept foreign/joint degrees per the national ENIC’s advice, to avoid parallel systems. Additionally, support pilot programmes or initiatives that model best practice – for example, sponsor a “joint PhD pilot” where a few institutions get funding and support to create recognition-friendly joint degrees (with ministry involvement to clear hurdles). The lessons can then scale to regular policy. Allocate resources to ENICs and QA agencies specifically earmarked for improving cross-border recognition infrastructure (e.g. building that joint programme database, or enhancing the diploma supplement format nationwide).
- **International Organisations (UNESCO, Council of Europe, OECD, etc.):** Facilitate platforms for exchange of best practices, and continue to push normative envelopes. UNESCO can help by developing a global portal listing recognised higher education institutions and accredited programmes (some regions do this; a global one would be golden). That way, any credential evaluator anywhere could confirm authenticity quickly – a boon for recognition

and fraud prevention alike. The Council of Europe and UNESCO could also consider a recommendation on the recognition of dual degrees (since we have one for joint, but duals are less codified) to guide states in handling those, as duals become more common. OECD, through its reviews and forums, should integrate recognition-first thinking into broader higher ed policy advice: for example, when advising a country on improving PhD training, mention recognition of cross-border elements as part of quality and innovation. Support research and data collection: there is a paucity of comparative data on how often joint/dual graduates face problems. An international survey of alumni, or a tracking mechanism via ENIC-NARIC, would help quantify progress and remaining issues. International bodies can thus play a convening and standard-setting role, keeping recognition high on the agenda amidst many competing priorities in higher education.

By following these stakeholder-specific recommendations, the system can evolve towards a more seamless recognition landscape. The overarching theme is proactive transparency: anticipate what information and assurances a skeptical evaluator might need, and provide those upfront – be it through laws, documents, or communication. In doing so, we not only smooth out legitimate mobility but also shine light on any illegitimate actors (who thrive in shadows and ambiguities).

5.3 Monitoring and Impact Framework (Towards Ongoing Evaluation): Implementing the above changes is not a one-time fix; it requires continuous monitoring and an impact framework to evaluate success. A possible monitoring approach could include: setting up a dashboard of recognition outcomes for cross-border doctorates (e.g. number of recognition refusals reported, average processing time for joint vs single degrees, etc.) in regions like the EHEA and beyond. UNESCO and the ENIC-NARIC Network could collaborate on an annual “State of Degree Recognition” report that specifically highlights cross-border degrees. Key indicators might be the rate at which joint degree holders need to appeal decisions or present extra info, which should trend downward if reforms work. Another aspect is gathering feedback from graduates – are they encountering fewer hurdles? Qualitative follow-ups can reveal new pain points or verify that measures are effective. Impact should also be measured in terms of student choices: if recognition becomes assured, more students might enroll in joint

programmes; if problems persist, they may shy away. Thus, tracking enrolment and graduate numbers in collaborative doctoral programmes can indirectly signal confidence in recognition. Finally, the impact on quality should be watched: we expect that better recognition processes do not lower standards but instead motivate programmes to uphold clarity and quality. Accreditation reviews and perhaps external examinations can ensure that in making degrees recognition-friendly, academic rigor remains high (the study assumed they’re compatible, and monitoring should confirm this).

5.4 Limitations and Future Research: While comprehensive, this study was conceptual and policy-analytic in nature. It did not, for instance, include interviews with credential evaluators or surveys of graduates that could provide direct evidence of recognition experiences. Future research could address this gap by empirically investigating the outcomes of recent graduates from joint and dual PhD programmes across multiple countries: How many faced recognition troubles, and of what kind? Such data would enrich or challenge the assumptions made here. Additionally, as the global higher education landscape evolves, new models like multi-lateral “network” degrees (involving 3+ universities) or European University alliances granting joint degrees may emerge – these were beyond the scope of our three-option comparison and warrant separate study. The ethical and epistemological questions around recognition also invite deeper inquiry: for example, sociologically, how do notions of legitimacy differ across cultures in evaluating a credential, and could alternative recognition paradigms (like outcomes-based assessment regardless of formal credential) disrupt the current system? Another area is technology: future research on how blockchain or digital credentials might streamline recognition (or introduce new complexities) would be valuable.

Despite these limitations, the present article offers a timely synthesis and a forward-looking argument: that a recognition-first approach is both necessary and feasible. It aligns educational innovation with student protection, and by treating the portability of the degree as a design constraint, it ensures that the promise of cross-border doctoral education can be fully realised. In closing, the legitimacy of cross-border doctorates will increasingly rest on our collective ability to make recognition work first time, every time – a goal that is within reach if we heed the lessons and implement the recommendations discussed herein. This echoes the mission-driven learning

perspective that positions credential portability as integral to educational purpose (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025b).

References

- Altbach, P. G., & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3-4), 290-305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307303542>
- British Council. (2024). Post-graduate student mobility trends 2024. https://britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/postgraduate_mobility_trends_2024-october-14.pdf
- Carvalho, N., Rosa, M. J., & Amaral, A. (2022). Cross-Border Higher Education and Quality Assurance. Results from a Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 27(5), 695-718. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153221076900> (Original work published 2023)
- Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region. (2016). Revised Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees (DGII/EDU/HE (2016) 05). Council of Europe & UNESCO. Available at <https://harno.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2021-05/revised%20recommendation%20on%20the%20recognition%20of%20joint%20degrees.pdf>
- Council of Europe. (1997). Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention). ETS No.165. Available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/higher-education-and-research/lisbon-recognition-convention>
- Council of the European Union. (2018). Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher-education qualifications and learning periods abroad (2018/C 444/01). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AC_2018_444_R_0001
- Council of Europe/UNESCO. (2004). Recommendation on the recognition of joint degrees (adopted 9 June 2004). https://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Lisbon_Recognition_Convention/78/0/Recommendation_joint_degrees_9-June-2004_587780.pdf
- European Commission. (2024, March 27). Blueprint for a European degree [Fact sheet]. https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-03/European_Degree_factsheet_EN_final.pdf
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147-160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>
- European Commission, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), & Eurydice. (2020). The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2797/756192>
- European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process. (2016, June 3). Recognition 2003-2005. <https://ehea.info/cid102106/recognition-2003-2005.html>
- European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education. (2015). European approach for quality assurance of joint programmes (Version 1.0). https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf
- European Students' Union (ESU). (2024, February 22). ESU's position on the European degree (label). <https://esu-online.org/esus-position-on-the-european-degree-label/>
- European University Association. (2024). Transnational joint education provision: Mapping and analysis. Available at <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/1135:transnational-joint-education-provision-mapping-and-analysis.html>
- Hopbach, A. (2022). UNESCO-OECD guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education: Analysis and recommendations to move forward. UNESCO. Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389910>
- Jensen, M. C., & Meckling, W. H. (1976). Theory of the firm: Managerial behavior, agency costs and ownership structure. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 3(4), 305-360. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-405X\(76\)90026-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-405X(76)90026-X)

- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340–363. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226550>
- Nuffic. (2020). The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (3rd ed.). Available at https://www.hrk-modus.de/media/redaktion/Downloads/Web-Seminare/Downloads/Nuffic_European_Recognition_Manual_02_2020.pdf
- Nuffic. (2016). The European Recognition Manual for higher education institutions: Practical guidelines for credential evaluators and admissions officers to provide fair and flexible recognition of foreign degrees and studies abroad (2nd ed.). https://esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/8220_European-Recognition-Manual-Second-Edition-FIN.pdf
- OECD (2004), *Quality and Recognition in Higher Education: The Cross-border Challenge*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264015104-en>.
- OECD. (2005). *Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264055155-en-fr>
- OECD. (2024). *Quality matters: Strengthening the quality assurance of adult education and training*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f44a185b-en>
- OECD. (2025). *Education at a glance 2025: OECD indicators*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c0d9c79-en>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) & UNESCO. (2005). *Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education*. OECD Publishing. [41]. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/35779480.pdf>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., & Mulrow, C. D., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- SANGWA, S., & Mutabazi, P. (2025a). The Global Accreditation Paradox: Navigating the Tension Between Quality Assurance, Innovation, and Equity in Higher Education. *Open Journal of Transformative Education & Lifelong Learning* (ISSN: 3105-305X), 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.65655/h0agkf62>
- SANGWA, S., & Mutabazi, P. (2025b). Mission-Driven Learning Theory: Ordering Knowledge and Competence to Life Mission. *Open Journal of Transformative Education & Lifelong Learning* (ISSN: 3105-305X), 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.65655/0859ab04>
- Spence, M. (1973). Job market signaling. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), 355–374. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010>
- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 571–610. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1995.9508080331>
- UNESCO. (2019). *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379686>
- Vincent-Lancrin, S., & Pfotenhauer, S. (2012). *Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education: Where do we stand?* (OECD Education Working Papers No. 70). OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/5k9fd0kz0j6b-en>
- Zentralstelle für ausländisches Bildungswesen (ZAB). (2025). *Statement of comparability for foreign university degrees: Guidance for applicants*. <https://zab.kmk.org/en/statement-comparability>