Peer review history for:

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The policy framework for international collaborative programmes: Perpetuating outdated prescriptions for joint and double degrees? [peer review history] S Afr J Sci. 2026;122(1/2), Art. #23272. https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2026/23272/peerreview

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Reviewer 1: Round 1
Date completed: 30 August 2025
Conflicts of interest: None

Recommendation: Accept / Revisions required / Resubmit for review / Resubmit elsewhere / Decline / See comments
REVIEWER: Accept
Does the manuscript fall within the scope of SAJS? Yes/No
REVIEWER: Yes
Is the manuscript written in a style suitable for a non-specialist and is it of wider interest than to specialists alone? Yes/No
REVIEWER: Yes
Does the manuscript contain sufficient novel and significant information to justify publication? Yes/No
REVIEWER: Yes
Do the Title and Abstract clearly and accurately reflect the content of the manuscript? Yes/No
REVIEWER: Yes
Is the research problem significant and concisely stated? Yes/No
REVIEWER: Yes
Are the methods described comprehensively? Yes/No
REVIEWER: Yes
Is the statistical treatment appropriate? Yes/No/Not applicable/Not qualified to judge
REVIEWER: Not applicable
Are the interpretations and conclusions justified by the research results? Yes/Partly/No
REVIEWER: Yes
Please rate the manuscript on overall contribution to the field Excellent/Good/Average/Below average/Poor
REVIEWER: Good

Please rate the manuscript on language, grammar and tone
Excellent/Good/Average/Below average/Poor

REVIEWER: Good

Is the manuscript succinct and free of repetition and redundancies?
Yes/No

REVIEWER: Yes

The number of tables in the manuscript is
Too few/Adequate/Too many/Not applicable

REVIEWER: Adequate

The number of figures in the manuscript is
Too few/Adequate/Too many/Not applicable

REVIEWER: Not applicable

Are the results and discussion confined to relevance to the objective(s)?
Yes/No

REVIEWER: Yes

Is the supplementary material relevant and separated appropriately from the main document?
Yes/No/Not applicable

REVIEWER: Yes

Please rate the manuscript on overall quality
Excellent/Good/Average/Below average/Poor

REVIEWER: Good

Is appropriate and adequate reference made to other work in the field?
Yes/No

REVIEWER: Yes

Is it stated that ethical approval was granted by an institutional ethics committee for studies involving human subjects and non-human vertebrates?
Yes/No/Not applicable

REVIEWER: No

If accepted, would you recommend that the article receives priority publication?
Yes/No

REVIEWER: Yes

Are you willing to review a revision of this manuscript?
Yes/No

REVIEWER: Yes

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REVIEWER: Yes

Comments to the Author:
The paper is well written and offers a detailed and structured analysis of the policy framework of international collaborative programmes in South Africa. The exploration of the definitional challenges for such programmes and for policy makers in drawing up policy frameworks explores a critical issue for international higher education and one that the author attempts to address. The relevant literature is discussed in a coherent and cogent way that allows the reader a broad understanding of the key issues facing policy makers drawing up frameworks to ensure quality assurance for HEIs embarking on international and collaborative programmes.

Author response to Reviewer 1: Round 1

The reviewer's positive remarks and time taken to engage with the work are acknowledged and sincerely appreciated.

Reviewer 2: Round 1
Date completed: 10 October 2025
Conflicts of interest: None

Recommendation: Accept / Revisions required / Resubmit for review / Resubmit elsewhere / Decline / See comments
REVIEWER: Accept
Does the manuscript fall within the scope of SAJS? Yes/No
REVIEWER: Yes
Is the manuscript written in a style suitable for a non-specialist and is it of wider interest than to specialists alone? Yes/No
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Is the supplementary material relevant and separated appropriately from the main document?
Yes/No/Not applicable

REVIEWER: Not applicable

Please rate the manuscript on overall quality
Excellent/Good/Average/Below average/Poor

REVIEWER: Excellent

Is appropriate and adequate reference made to other work in the field?
Yes/No

REVIEWER: Yes

Is it stated that ethical approval was granted by an institutional ethics committee for studies involving human subjects and non-human vertebrates?
Yes/No/Not applicable

REVIEWER: Not applicable

If accepted, would you recommend that the article receives priority publication?
Yes/No

REVIEWER: Yes

Are you willing to review a revision of this manuscript?
Yes/No

REVIEWER: Yes

With regard to our policy on 'Publishing peer review reports', do you give us permission to publish your anonymised peer review report alongside the authors' response, as a supplementary file to the published article? Publication is voluntary and only with permission from both yourself and the author.
Yes/No

REVIEWER: Yes

Comments to the Author:

1.Overall, this is a very well-researched, well-argued article identifying a conceptual gap in the guidance on Joint degrees, as reflected in the current Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa.

2.The arguments made here have the potential to improve the DHET guidance significantly and to have a constructive impact on the contemporary approach of SA universities, to collaborative international programmes.

3.The article is also very timely, in view of work undertaken by the CHE.

4.While the conclusions and recommendations are very clear, I recommend that

- the abstract be slightly reordered ;
- an improved title that reflects the urgency of addressing the conceptual gap in the PF regarding joint degrees;

5. Specifically, I suggest the following:

-Line 10: place the statement about the policy framework at the start of the paragraph.

-I suggest using the term international collaborative programmes initially as it will be clearer for the reader to start with the more generic term and then go into the different types of collaborative degrees, rather than using the terms interchangeably at the outset in the first part of the abstract.

-Line 41, perhaps mention that you also draw on a penultimate version of the PF.

-Line 188 perhaps say "did not make the concept explicit rather than "missed" as you go on to say it is implied.

-Line 222, perhaps list the types of degrees here again as a signpost

-Line 288 Consider moving this paragraph "Variable nomenclature and double-counted" credits to immediately after the paragraph on consecutive degrees.

-From Line 326, you are already talking about Double (or dual) degrees so move the headings up here.

-Line 396 perhaps replace heading with the "diversity of double degrees"

[See Appendix 1 for Reviewer 2's comments made directly on the manuscript]

Author response to Reviewer 2: Round 1

1.Overall, this is a very well-researched, well-argued article identifying a conceptual gap in the guidance on Joint degrees, as reflected in the current Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa

AUTHOR: We sincerely thank the reviewer for the time taken to engage with the work and their thoughtful feedback is gratefully acknowledged.

2.The arguments made here have the potential to improve the DHET guidance significantly and to have a constructive impact on the contemporary approach of SA universities, to collaborative international programmes.

AUTHOR: We appreciate the reviewer's encouraging comments regarding the potential contribution of this work.

3.The article is also very timely, in view of work undertaken by the CHE.

AUTHOR: We appreciate the reviewer's recognition of the relevance of this work and hope to catch the attention of the regulatory and quality assurance audiences in time to provide them with sufficient rationale to lead to a more useful framework and clear guidelines for implementation, which are sorely needed.

4.While the conclusions and recommendations are very clear, I recommend that:

- the abstract be slightly reordered

AUTHOR: This recommendation has been adopted.

- an improved title that reflects the urgency of addressing the conceptual gap in the PF regarding joint degrees

AUTHOR: We agree that a stronger, more urgent title is necessary. We are slightly conflicted though, because we wanted to highlight in the title that the researcher conducted a policy analysis. Instead, we have adjusted the keywords to reflect that it was a policy analysis, which allows us to highlight the conceptual gap, outdated nature of the policy framework prescriptions and make it apparent that we are addressing joint and double degrees in the new title: 'Policy framework conceptual gap perpetuates outdated prescriptions for joint and double degrees'

Line 10: place the statement about the policy framework at the start of the paragraph.

AUTHOR: We have noted and adjusted the order of the abstract as recommended.

I suggest using the term international collaborative programmes initially as it will be clearer for the reader to start with the more generic term and then go into the different types of collaborative degrees, rather than using the terms interchangeably at the outset in the first part of the abstract.

AUTHOR: This is helpful and improves the logical flow.

Line 141, perhaps mention that you also draw on a penultimate version of the PF.

AUTHOR: This has been done, just in a slightly different place, line 157 of the reviewer's version.

Line 188 perhaps say "did not make the concept explicit rather than "missed" as you go on to say it is implied.

AUTHOR: Excellent suggestion, thank you, it has been accepted.

Line 222, perhaps list the types of degrees here again as a signpost

AUTHOR: Thank you, they have been signposted as recommended.

Line 288 Consider moving this paragraph "Variable nomenclature and double-counted" credits to immediately after the paragraph on consecutive degrees.

AUTHOR: This recommendation has been accepted, thank you; the re-ordering improves the flow.

From Line 326, you are already talking about Double (or dual) degrees so move the headings up here.

AUTHOR: Great suggestion, thank you; the section is more readable now.

Line 396 perhaps replace heading with the "diversity of double degrees"

AUTHOR: Thank you for this suggestion. We have chosen "variety of double degrees" instead. This helpfully reduces the overuse of the phrase 'so-called'. This change has meant that we had to draw the terminology through to a few other places in the text, including the headings for Table 1 and 2.

Appendix 1: Reviewer 2's comments on manuscript

International collaborative programmes in South Africa: policy analysis of the policy framework

Abstract

~~Joint and double degrees are considered effective means for enhancing and expanding international research collaboration. However, implementing these international collaborative programmes is complex. Arranging for joint supervision, examination, and award of a joint degree with a global partner institution, or establishing a joint programme by integrating two existing programmes and delivering the offering collaboratively, is intricate since these efforts intersect with countries' national regulations and policies governing the delivery and award of qualifications~~. The Policy Framework on the Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa acknowledges the strategic priority of international research collaboration for the country, and the role of cross-border and collaborative provision of higher education in this. Joint and double degrees are considered effective means for enhancing and expanding international research collaboration. However, implementing these international collaborative programmes is complex. Arranging for joint supervision, examination, and award of a joint degree with a global partner institution, or establishing a joint programme by integrating two existing programmes and delivering the offering collaboratively, is intricate since these efforts intersect with countries' national regulations and policies governing the delivery and award of qualifications. While the Policy Framework permits 'joint degrees', it does not allow 'double (or dual) degrees'. This article asserts that the Policy Framework exhibits several shortcomings. The parameters for collaborative degrees are challenging to implement due to outdated influences on prescribed definitions and practices, and the ban on all so-called double (or dual) degrees undermines the policy framework's goal of strengthening international research collaboration. The article illustrates the value of the 'joint programmes' concept to unlock understanding that not all double degrees conform to the policy framework's definition. It also demonstrates the utility of 'integration' and 'jointness' as criteria that can be applied to distinguish a double degree resulting from joint programmes from those that do not, but which may also be identified as double, dual, or consecutive degrees. This challenges the exclusion of all so-called "double" degrees from the policy framework.

Significance: Urgency

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) is developing a quality assurance framework for collaborative programmes in South Africa, guided by the Policy Framework regulations and definitions. If its shortcomings are not addressed beforehand, the CHE's framework risks further entrenching the restrictive interpretations of the Policy Framework. The desired outcome is a more agile and nuanced framework for the coherent interpretation and implementation of international collaborative programmes that preserves the original intent of the Policy Framework and supports

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Commented [A2]: I suggest some re-ordering; place the statement about the policy framework in line 10 at the start of the paragraph. I suggest using the term international collaborative programmes initially as it will be clearer for the reader to start with the more generic term and then go into the different types of collaborative degrees, rather than using the terms interchangeably at the outset.

its goal of building, expanding, and ensuring strong international research partnerships. The article offers practical and evidence-informed recommendations to guide a policy review.

Keywords: joint degrees, doctorate, policy, internationalisation, higher education

Introduction

South Africa's national policies relating to higher education in recent years have emphasised the need to grow postgraduate enrolments, increase throughput and, especially, to increase the number of PhD graduates ~~by~~in the country, while acknowledging a triad of challenges: lack of supervisory capacity; under-resourced institutions; and inadequate funding.[1] South African higher education institutions (HEIs) are thus driven to explore ways to overcome these challenges. Joint and double degrees are an obvious mechanism to expand international research collaboration at the postgraduate level by capitalising on the opportunities they represent to enhance capacity through joint (shared) supervision, gain access to better (or differently) resourced institutions and deepen international research partnerships. However, international joint and double degrees are also among the more complex programmes to implement since they represent the intersection of countries' national regulations and policies for the delivery and award of qualifications.

Globally, there has been significant growth in recent times in the phenomena of joint and double degrees, which although not always clearly defined, are widely regarded as important and successful vehicles for deepening international collaboration[2, 3, 4, 5, 6] due to the opportunities and benefits they can represent. As such, they are prioritised as part of many institutions' internationalisation strategies, or by supra-national regional organisations like the European Union and form the basis for sharing resources and building strategic partnerships.

In policymaking, Marginson[7] contends that higher education policy must "devise an appropriate set of steering instruments" to facilitate global engagement and enable access to strategic opportunities. Over the past fifteen years, the South African higher education sector has been confronted by circumstances where national policy did not adequately cater for novel ventures, primarily with Bologna signatory countries by its HEIs. In pursuing their internationalisation activities, involving joint and double degrees, institutions proceeded with institutional-level joint and double degree policymaking without national regulatory frameworks, in consultation with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).[8] This behaviour exhibits signs of what Marginson describes as dis-embedding.[7] Jooste and Hagenmeier note that the need for clear national policies to embed joint degrees was thus a major impetus for the national policy.[9]

The Policy Framework on the Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa[10], (hereafter PF), is the culmination of ongoing calls by the HE sector for the state to formalise and prioritise internationalisation, a range of activities seeing the movement of primarily students and researchers, but also of programmes, taking place in more or less organised ways between different South African HE institutions and their international partner institutions. Among other priorities, the PF acknowledges that strengthening international research collaboration is a strategic priority for South Africa. It echoes the National Development Plan (NDP)[11] by emphasising the importance of building

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global partnerships to expand access to research funding and facilities for South African scholars, while also facilitating equitable and reciprocal access for international researchers to South Africa's research environment.[10]

In an overview analysis of the policy framework, Jooste and Hagenmeier[9] highlighted implementation challenges posed by the PF for HEIs, and indicated the need for deeper engagement with the direction the PF provides for specific aspects, such as international collaborative degrees. The PF is both highly prescriptive and unclear, and at times contradictory regarding these. This paper aims to address these issues by offering a policy analysis of the national policy framework. The analysis is guided by the research question of how, if at all, the national policy framework parameters for provision support implementation of international collaborative degree programmes between South African universities and their international partners?

Overview of collaborative degree programmes

A primarily European initiative, joint degrees (used as a collective term) became an important tool for achieving the integration goals of the Bologna Process.[12] Launched in 1999, the Bologna Process aimed to improve the quality and recognition of qualifications, and facilitate mobility and collaboration across Europe and beyond.[13] Joint degrees are seen as relevant for joint quality assurance, mobility, recognition of qualifications, and the creation of a single European Higher Education Area.[14] The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) is the international legal instrument for recognising qualifications in Europe. As a joint convention of the Council of Europe and UNESCO, it covers more countries than just Europe, including Australia, Canada, Israel, the United States, and others.[15] Consequently, its reach extends beyond Europe, influencing collaborative partnership arrangements worldwide, including those between SA HEIs and their international partners.

The Bologna Process did not initially distinguish between joint and double degrees.[16] This distinction was first made by the Coimbra Group[17] and later refined by Schüle[16], and initiatives stemming from the Bologna Process, like the JOIMAN[18] project, where the notion of jointness and integration of programmes gained expression. The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC), responsible for implementing the LRC, noted that the increasing development of joint degrees had created recognition challenges for degree holders, as these degrees, by their nature, did not belong to any single national education system[15]. This led to a revision of the recommendation on recognising joint degrees[19], including clarification on how a joint degree emanating from a joint programme must be issued.

Chapter 6 of the PF on 'Cross-Border and Collaborative Provision of Higher Education' outlines parameters (prescriptions and provisions) that govern the participation of institutions in collaborative degree programmes.[10] The PF establishes collaborative degree programmes as a collective term

and identifies four types under its umbrella: co-badged, joint, consecutive and double (or dual) degrees.[10] What has become clear from engagements with prospective and current partner institutions in various countries over several years, and is also acknowledged in the scholarly literature and authoritative guidance documents, is that many definitions and terms are used to describe collaborative degree programmes, pointing to a conceptual gap in the field. According to Bamford[5]

> *… 'double degree', 'dual award', 'double diploma', 'joint degree', 'joint double degree' mean both the same or different things, depending on those using the terms and the country in which they are used.*

Furthermore, despite sustained efforts to arrive at a common understanding, lack of clarity around application of the terms double and joint degree (and other related terms like double and joint diploma, dual award, etc.) persist. [20,21]

Methodology

Policy document analysis is a qualitative approach used to examine policy texts, and is regarded as an essential instrument for educational researchers for developing, implementing, and reviewing policies.[22] Since policy documents are created within a regulatory context, they tend to be relatively constant, though they are periodically reviewed. Consequently, they are regarded as reliable sources of evidence, generally offering precise information and comprehensive insight into the issue under investigation. A policy analysis was conducted, focusing the conceptualisation and implications for implementation of international collaborative degrees as espoused within the PF[10], which served as the primary data source for this analysis. (Perhaps mention that you also draw on a penultimate version of the PF).

Ball[23], describes policies as "textual interventions in practice" that provide researchers with problems "that must be solved in context". Taylor et al.'s[24] established approach to policy analysis[9], was used to analyse the PF. Jooste and Hagenmeier's[9] initial PF analysis, focused on the context within which the PF was drafted and provided an overview analysis of the PF content. They did not, however, engage in depth with the challenges posed by the PF or its prescriptions regarding specific aspects, such as the directives for collaborative degrees. To do so would be to invoke Taylor et al's.[24] third element of policy analysis, namely the consequences of policy texts[22]. Accordingly, this policy analysis examined the context in which the PF chapter was drafted, the content of the text about international collaborative degrees, and highlighted existing and anticipated consequences of the PF's regulatory prescriptions. Consistent with Ball's[23] approach of linking the micro- and macro-aspects of policies, our policy analysis at the micro-level (implications for particularly research-intensive universities) is linked to an understanding of the context at the macro-level (national policy).

The PF document, along with international regulatory frameworks, authoritative guidance documents, HEIs' resources, and scholarly literature related to the phenomena of cross-border higher education and international joint and double degrees, was sourced online. Data analysis involved examining the PF text in detail, classifying, arranging, or recombining evidence that addressed the focus of the study, namely, to review its regulatory content, to uncover any inconsistencies and discrepancies in the text[23], as identified in the aforementioned research gap, and analyse and compare various perspectives to understand how the policy content could be interpreted. The following policy elements were analysed and compared, where possible, with other available definitions and descriptions: the PF features of international collaborative programmes, definitions, and descriptions of the four types of international collaborative degrees identified by the PF.

Results and discussion

The concept of a joint programme

Between the finalisation of a 'Draft Policy on Postgraduate Collaborative, Joint and Double Qualifications' by a DHET Working Group[25] in 2014 and the completion of the full PF, two significant developments occurred internationally. To bridge the conceptual gap in the field of joint and double degrees, the Bologna Process, through a European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) in higher education project called JOQAR (Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded)[18], decided to unravel(decouple?) the programme from the degree and thus the Bologna Process now consistently refers to joint programmes rather than joint degree programmes[26] when discussing joint degrees. Additionally, the LRC's 2004 recommendations on the recognition of joint degrees[27] were revised in 2016, incorporating the concept of joint programmes and clarifying how joint degrees resulting from these programmes must be certified[19]. The context within which Chapter 6 of the PF was developed indicates a temporal gap in the final PF, as it did not keep pace with critical updates to information underpinning its content, and thus with the latest conceptual developments in the field[19]. Consequently, the PF does not explicitly address the concept of a joint programme.

Joint programmes and PF collaborative programme features

A joint programme is defined as "[a]n integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different HEIs and leading to a (double/multiple or joint) degree".[26] Although the PF missed the concept, the idea of jointness and integration of collaborative degree programmes, is implied in the PF's Article 6.2.8. – 6.2.11. These regulations state the expected features of such programmes[10] are collaborative in nature, leading to a qualification that is regulated at an institutional level through an agreement between two or more HEIs and must define a programme that,

Commented [A4]: Line 188 perhaps say "did not make the concept explicit rather than "missed" as you go on to say it is implied.

> *feature[s] a jointly developed and integrated curriculum; … a single research topic resulting in a single dissertation or thesis; and generally, [does] not involve an extension of the normal duration of the programme.*

The Articles further expect that each higher education institution must make a substantial contribution to the programme, and that since students are typically expected to undertake research at the partnering institutions, the agreement must provide clarity on the time to be spent at the partner institutions and recognition of this time spent and work done at each of the institutions within the jointly developed and integrated curriculum, underscoring the single qualification. Articles 6.2.10. – 6.2.11. describe the certification requirements as:

> *Certificates issued by each collaborating institution must attest to the award of the qualification, in which case each certificate must refer to the collaborative nature of the qualification and specify that the qualification is being conferred in conjunction with another institution (or other institutions) and that the certificates of the two (or more) partner institutions must be read in conjunction with each other and with the degree supplement, where relevant.*

and expect "institutions offering collaborative degrees with foreign universities [to] also issue a transcript and a transcript supplement."

These essential collaborative programme features in the PF share commonalities with critical elements of a joint programme[26] in emphasising integration of the curriculum and jointness of many aspects across participating institutions.

Comparing PF types to joint programmes

Using joint programmes as a conceptual tool, through their critical characteristics denoted by 'integration' and 'jointness' for comparative purposes, the four types of international collaborative programmes (perhaps list them her again as a signpost) identified in the PF were analysed.

Co-badged degrees

These are single-institution awards under a formal cooperation agreement, with credit recognition by the awarding institution, for work completed at the partner institution (or to recognise co-supervision by the partner), up to a maximum of 50% and where the non-awarding institution's logo is added to the awarding institution's certificate. This mode of collaboration amounts to an exchange agreement that formalises a student's mobility and recognises the involvement of the non-degree awarding institution on the awarding institution's degree certificate. A co-badged degree does not result from a joint programme because it is only offered and awarded by a single institution.

Joint degrees

A single programme of study, under a formal cooperation agreement, jointly offered and jointly delivered and where the partner institutions jointly award a single qualification. Joint degrees in the PF primarily accommodate international collaborative postgraduate degrees by research, typically doctorates (since the South African format of a 100% thesis master's degree is uncommon internationally). The PF sets detailed parameters for joint degrees, but without consulting the revised recommendations on the recognition of joint degrees[19], overlooks the possibility that awarding a single qualification is not a function of the number of certificates awarded. As Becker[28] points out:

> *it is important to note that a 'degree' is an award, not the document (the diploma) providing evidence of having obtained the degree. It is [therefore] possible to issue a joint degree, … [as] separate documents (the diplomas).*

A single or two linked certificates for a joint degree?

In a pre-final iteration of the draft PF[29], Article 17.3, distinguished between issuing a joint degree as a single certificate, or, if a country's national legislation required, a joint degree could also be issued via a cross-referenced or linked national certificate from each partner:

> *17.13. Upon completion of the study programme, the student is awarded*
>
> *17.13.1. a single certificate issued and signed jointly by the officers of the two (or more) HEIs involved in the programme; unless*
>
> *17.13.2. national legislation requires that national certificates issued by each collaborating institution must be issued attesting to the award of the qualification, in which case each certificate must refer to the joint nature of the qualification, specify that the qualification is being conferred in conjunction with another institution (or institutions) and that the certificates of the two (or more) partner institutions must be read in conjunction with each other and with the degree supplement;*

The final PF[10] omitted Article 17.13.2 from the certification options for joint degrees and instead moved its substantive content to Article 6.2.10, under the expected features that all programmes leading to a collaborative degree must exhibit. However, confusingly, Article 6.6.4.1 states that joint research degrees (Master's and Doctorates) must be awarded as "a single certificate issued and signed jointly by the authorised officers of the two (or more) HEIs involved in the programme"[10] as the sole attestation of the joint degree.

Several scholars[5,16,30,31,] highlight the considerable difficulties with the recognition and legality of joint degrees issued as a single certificate while noting that, in many countries, it is impossible to offer a joint qualification with another institution.[4] While for some institutions, legal obstacles prevent them from issuing a joint degree via a single certificate, two examples illustrate that institutions either choose to exercise a choice in this regard or are flexible on the matter. Leiden University in the Netherlands has decided in principle against awarding a joint doctorate with a single diploma featuring two insignias due to concerns about the potential of this practice to lower the quality of their diploma and the significant practical challenges involved when a diploma must be printed with both logos and signed by all relevant officials in two countries.[32] The Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium requires that when a joint PhD is conducted with another institution, each must award its own PhD title, regardless of whether these titles are displayed on a single diploma or on each institution's original diploma that cross-references the certificate awarded simultaneously by the partner institution.[33] These two examples challenge the idea that the number of certificates equals the number of qualifications[20], and demonstrate the need for similar flexibility in the PF to enable South African HEIs to collaborate with institutions from other national systems. If this is the purpose of Article 6.2.10., it must be clarified, because Article 6.6.4.1. can be interpreted as the only route to awarding a joint degree. Different interpretations leave room for differences in implementation[34] of the PF.

Variable nomenclature and double-counted credits

Since the earliest attempts to clarify definitions about joint degrees[17], the question of double-counting of credits for the same work toward two separate programmes and awarding two qualifications has arisen[20] In the context of a single programme in South Africa, institutions are guided by the '50% residency rule'.[35] The PF recognises that international collaborative programmes require credit recognition and transfer arrangements[36] and thus extrapolates the national '50% residency rule'[35] in the PF, but only for co-badged and consecutive degrees[10].

Commented [A5]: Consider moving this paragraph "Variable nomenclature and double-counted" credits to immediately after the paragraph on consecutive degrees.

Consecutive degrees

These degrees are defined in the PF as:

> *a qualification awarded by an HEI where it grants credit, and exemption, for up to 50% of the work required for the qualification on the grounds of equivalent work done for a completed qualification conferred by the HEI, or by another HEI recognised for the purpose,*

and are described as consisting of "learning that leads to two degrees usually completed consecutively".[10]

This appears to permit completion of two study programmes at the same or successive levels with credit recognition between the two awarding institutions, up to a maximum of 50%. However, some ambiguity arises around the levels of the programmes, with the reference to "equivalent work", and the timing, where the two degrees are "usually completed consecutively". This could be interpreted as the PF permitting simultaneous completion of two programmes at the same level.

Instead of consecutive degrees, Knight[37] defines a combined degree programme as one that "awards two different qualifications at consecutive levels upon completion of the requirements established by the partner institutions", which clarifies that the programmes are at different levels, e.g., Bachelor's + Master's, but does not clarify the timing.

The Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) combines all the possibilities mentioned for so-called consecutive degrees in its definition of a dual award[38], involving:

> *… one or more courses of study that leads to the award of two separate qualifications. Where the course involves an arrangement between two providers ……., one of the qualifications is typically conferred by each provider. A dual award may involve one AQF level, or two sequential AQF levels - for example, two Masters degrees (MBA/MA) or a Bachelor and Diploma qualification (BSc/Dip Ed). 'Collaborative double-degree courses' are a form of dual award.*

Double (or dual) degrees

It is important to distinguish clearly between a double degree and a dual degree. Like the PF, several scholars use the terms "double degree" and "dual degree" interchangeably.[3,37] The Bologna perspective, however, takes a different view on their interchangeability.[26,28] Aerden and Reczulska[26] note that while the concept of a dual degree is regularly used in the USA, a common definition is rare. According to Becker[28], unlike a double degree that results from a joint programme, a dual degree is not awarded by a joint programme, due to the absence of integration and jointness in dual degree programmes. By combining common features from the definitions they found, Aerden and Reczulska[26] propose the following definition for a dual degree:

> *Two degrees awarded individually, attesting the successful completion of two separate curricula, with potential overlap and efficiencies in course-taking, and, if more than one institution is involved, each institution is primarily responsible for its own degree.*

~~**Double (or dual) degrees**~~

The PF defines a double (or dual) degree as referring:

Commented [A6]: you are already starting to talk about Double and dual degrees from here so move the heading.

> *to a programme of study offered collaboratively by two HEIs in terms of a collaboration … agreement that may feature jointly developed and integrated curricula and agreed-upon mutual credit recognition and where the successful student is awarded two distinct degrees, issued separately by each partner institution.*[10]

In addition, the "certificates [awarded are] typical of those issued by each institution."[10] PF Article 6.8.1 does not permit double and dual degrees as they are regarded as a quality risk.[10]

By contrast, Aerden and Reczulska[26] and Becker[28] understand double degrees as one of the possible outcomes of a joint programme represented by two documents or diplomas, rather than conflating two documents with one award. The degree is not the documents[28]. Aerden and Reczulska's[26] dual degree definition, however, shares the feature of "[t]wo degrees awarded individually" with the PF description of a double (or dual) degree as leading to the award "of a distinct qualification by each of the partners."[10] Their emphasis on "two separate curricula", however, differs significantly from the PF definition of a double or dual degree, which describes the collaborative study programme as possibly featuring a "jointly developed and integrated curricula"[10]. These features of jointness and integration are incompatible with separate curricula. Specifying "two distinct degrees" implies independence of curricula and outcomes, which aligns with Aerden and Reczulska's[26] dual degree definition. The latter mode of collaborative programmes also goes by various other names but is commonly also called a dual award[37], a double diploma[5], or an international dual award[31].

Considering the PF definition of a double (or dual) degree[10], Aerden and Reczulska's[26] definition of a dual degree, and TEQSA's[38] description of "collaborative double-degree courses", consecutive degrees are regarded as dual degrees, or double degrees, depending on the region of the world.

Consequences of the PF's shortcomings

Our analysis has noted the inconsistencies in the PF's definitions. For example, by permitting consecutive degrees in name, the PF inadvertently facilitates dual or double degrees, as interpreted in other contexts.

The absence of the joint programme concept led to variations and inconsistencies in the definitions and descriptions of the types of international collaborative programmes identified in the PF. Being unable to reconcile the terminological dilemmas of working in a global context, where absolutes like not permitting double or dual degrees, or being highly prescriptive, may have unintended consequences for the PF's implementation. For example, all countries that have ratified the LRC must ensure they can recognise qualifications from other nations. In the United Kingdom (UK), the UK National Information Centre (UK ENIC) serves this purpose on behalf of the government and is interconnected with other European Network of National Information Centres (ENICs) to facilitate

the exchange of information regarding qualifications and recognition across different countries. The ENICs have shared the PF's ban on so-called double (or dual) degrees across more than 50 countries that participate in this network. Consequently, while the PF prevents SA HEIs from calling anything a double degree, even though there may be justified cases for using the term, the ban may prevent them from legitimately engaging in joint programme arrangements that result in two linked degree certificates. The latter scenario is common among Bologna signatory countries. These are also the higher education systems most active on the terrain of double degrees at the Master's level and thus most likely to approach South African HEIs to establish such partnership arrangements. The PF ban on all so-called double degrees will thus limit the opportunities it aims to support.

Adjusting the definitions and descriptions of types of collaborative programmes in the PF is, however, insufficient to resolve the PF issues raised in this article, because banning something by name means that higher education practitioners will continue to encounter the terminology dilemma.

Comparing so-called double degrees

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This article proposes that so-called double degrees cannot be understood as a single phenomenon, nor should the term be used interchangeably with dual degrees, or in the absolute manner as is currently the case in the PF. Utilising the concept of a joint programme, and applying the idea of jointness and integration to the constituent parts of programmes and collaborative relationships, two programme arrangements, both described by Lippold and Galla[39] as 'double degrees' are compared in Table 1. A comparison is drawn between the characteristics of each, where one results from a joint programme and the other does not.

Table 1: Comparison of characteristics of two so-called double degree collaborative arrangements

Table 1 highlights the distinct separateness of the programmes under Collaborative Arrangement A compared to the greater interdependence (or jointness) and integration of those under Collaborative Arrangement B. It also illustrates that establishing a joint programme with the characteristics listed under Collaborative Arrangement B leads to a double degree[26,28,39] when two diplomas (certificates) are issued, but awards a single qualification. Depending on the context[5] therefore, and noting that not all arrangements masquerading as so-called double degrees result from a joint programme[28], highlights the risk of over-reliance on definitions without sufficient criteria to distinguish between varieties.

Differentiating double and dual degrees

418 The DHET's aim in banning all so-called double (or dual) degrees is based on its description and
419 definition of these degrees in the PF, which aims to prevent awarding two qualifications for minimal
420 effort and to maintain the integrity of SA HEIs' qualifications. The comparison in Table 1 offers clearer
421 support for these goals than what is provided in the PF. By examining the ideas of integration and
422 jointness involved in joint programmes and outlining specific criteria to identify the types of
423 collaborative programmes that the DHET wants SA HEIs to avoid, the analysis opens possibilities
424 for those initiatives that match the broader aims of the PF. To address the terminology issues in the
425 PF, Table 2 suggests potential definitions that the DHET might consider, which more closely reflect
426 international practices.

427 **Table 2:** Proposed definitions for differentiating types of so-called double degrees
428
429 Following on from the comparative analysis in Table 1 and drawing on the proposed definitions in
430 Table 2, Figure 1 visualises how collaborative programme types with increasing depths of integration
431 and levels of jointness**Error! Bookmark not defined.** can be located on a continuum[8] of integration
432 and jointness of the constituent parts.
433
434 **Figure 1:** Collaborative programmes types on a continuum of integration and jointness

435
436 ## Conclusions

437 "It is interesting to look at the way in which definitions can shape policy and how
438 practice can influence definitions and policy"[40]
439
440 This article presents the results of a policy analysis of the DHET's Policy Framework on the
441 Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa. We examined the context in which the PF
442 chapter on 'Cross-Border and Collaborative Provision of Higher Education' was drafted, its content,
443 and the consequences of its parameters for the implementation of international collaborative
444 programmes by SA HEIs. We highlighted that the PF chapter's content was drafted and largely
445 finalised in 2014, before work on the rest of the PF began. This resulted in a final PF that overlooked
446 important international developments and concepts that emerged from updates to significant policy
447 reference documents when setting the regulatory parameters for offering international collaborative
448 degree programmes by SA HEIs.
449
450 The most problematic regulatory aspect of the PF is the ban on so-called double (or dual) degrees.[10]
451 Based on the definition in the PF and the explanatory rationale for why these double (or dual)
452 degrees are prohibited, our analysis suggests that the underlying intention of the PF was to exclude
453 those types of double or dual degrees that do not originate from a joint programme. However, the

concept of a 'joint programme' and the expertise now available in the sector were not accessible when the PF chapter was drafted. Consequently, a joint programme and its role in clarifying misconceptions about double degrees, along with the idea that differentiating 'dual' from 'double' degrees might aid classification within the South African context, could not be adequately articulated or supported with evidence during the PF consultation for thorough consideration by the PF authors.

Our policy analysis highlights discrepancies between PF definitions and those commonly encountered in international literature. The consequence of these discrepancies is that they hinder the easy implementation of international collaborative degree programmes between SA HEIs and their international partners. It is not only the ban on double degrees itself that poses a problematic consequence, but also the fact that scholarly literature[4], international quality assurance agencies, and current and prospective partners of SA HEIs have noted the ban, which potentially closes off opportunities that support the PF's goal of strengthening international research collaboration. Therefore, although we propose alternative definitions to those in the PF, we caution against over-reliance on definitions in a field characterised by terminological fluidity. Instead, we advocate for the DHET to recognise the importance of clear distinguishing criteria for international collaborative programmes to guide future implementation by higher education practitioners of these strategically important vehicles for strengthening and deepening international research collaboration. This would necessitate a policy review of the PF by the DHET.

We further recommend that the DHET adopt the principle that international collaborative programmes exist on a continuum, ranging from shallow integration and low jointness at one end to deep integration and high levels of jointness at the other. This would strengthen the utility of the concept of joint programmes as a means of providing clear criteria, as suggested by our comparative scheme in Table 1, and already aligns with the key features of collaborative degree programmes outlined in Article 6.2.8. – 6.2.11 of the PF. This adoption would also support the PF's deduced underlying intention, through its current exclusion of all so-called double (and dual) degrees, without relying excessively on definitions as the primary regulatory tool, to achieve the same goal.

We also recommend re-inclusion of Article 6.2.10 (from ,,,) into the PF to preserve the emphasis on linked certificates to connect joint degrees which we regard as strengthening the notion of jointness and enhancing integrity by ensuring that, where institutions are compelled or choose to issue their own certificates, as Leiden University does, the award cannot be mistaken as denoting two or more qualifications for the same work.

Finally, the policy analysis and resulting recommendations presented in this article are timely in alerting the DHET to the shortcomings in the PF chapter and its associated definitions because national activities are ongoing. For instance, the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) Task Team

on Collaborative Qualifications surveyed SA HEIs in 2024 to develop a Framework for Quality Assurance for Collaborative Qualifications, which is guided by the PF's regulations and definitions, despite the shortcomings. Consequently, the article calls for the DHET to review the PF chapter and its associated definitions so that experience and practice can inform the reshaping of the definitions and policy governing the offering of international collaborative degree programmes in South Africa.

A limitation of the study is the lack of triangulation between our policy document analysis and independent reports from higher education practitioners at SA HEIs regarding their challenges in implementing international collaborative programmes, which leaves room for further research.

502 **Table 1:** Comparing characteristics of two so-called double degree collaborative arrangements[1]

Attributes	Collaborative Arrangement A	Collaborative Arrangement B
Main Features	Two independent degree programmes offered by two different universities.	Alignment of two degree programmes offered across two different universities.
	Each programme has its own comprehensive curriculum, but they are linked via a cooperation agreement.	One institution's curriculum is complemented by the other, creating an integrated programme as outlined in a cooperation agreement.
	Admission requirements depend on the home university's programme, and additional criteria are agreed upon for participation in the double degree option.	A joint admission process for the joint programme is strongly recommended.
	Students enrol in the home university's programme. They choose to either obtain a single home university degree or two degrees, one from their home university and one from the host.	Students enrol at the home and host university in a joint programme from the outset, leading to a double degree.
	Typically, students spend at least one semester abroad, usually not as part of a joint cohort, and with no alternating visits between partner universities.	Students spend time at the partner university. Usually, some of it is recommended as a joint cohort. Alternating visits between partner universities is possible.
	Each programme has its own examinations and study regulations.	Local examination regulations generally remain in force.
	Both partners award their diplomas independently (resulting in two distinct qualifications).	If the requirements of the cooperation agreement are met, the partners jointly award their diplomas (resulting in one qualification).
Organisational and Structural Parameters	Students follow a special track in their home university's programme. Mutually agreed equivalence lists specify which achievements at host universities are recognised and the procedures involved.	Participating partners deliver the courses/modules from their degree programmes.
	Local examination regulations apply.	Local examination regulations apply. An agreement outlining conditions such as timing and duration of mobility, when a student fails, etc., is required.
	Local quality assurance processes apply.	Local quality assurance processes apply, supplemented by the exchange of evaluation data. A joint quality assurance commission is recommended.
	A local contact person for the double degree option at each university.	Local programme coordinators are strongly recommended.
	Day-to-day programme management by the local structures.	Day-to-day programme management by the local structures.
	One thesis is written at the home university, usually with aligned credit transfer arrangements.	One jointly supervised thesis, worth an agreed credit weighting, is written at either partner.

[1] Adapted from Lippold and Galla[39], who envisaged a fully integrated joint programme, leading to a Joint Degree as a third column.

	Each programme is locally accredited. No new accreditation or validation is required.	New accreditation or validation for the joint programme may be required, but it is possible to use local programme accreditation.

503

504 **Table 2:** Proposed definitions for differentiating types of so-called double degrees

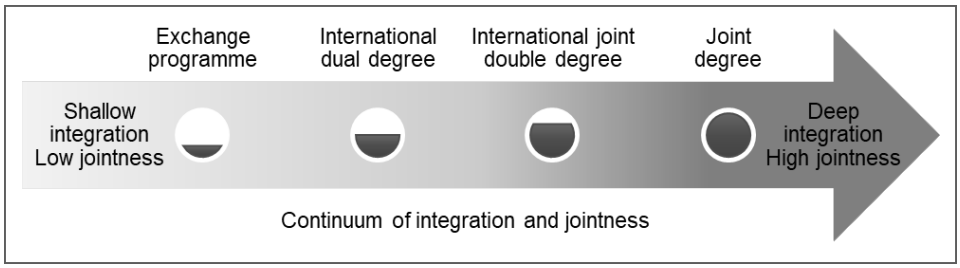
Proposed Types	**International dual degree**[2]	**International joint double degree**[3]
Proposed definitions	Where two (or more) HEIs collaborate to offer prospective students the opportunity to participate in two separate programmes in different countries and the possibility to achieve two distinct award qualifications at an equivalent level upon completion.	An international programme of study offering an integrated curriculum. It is delivered jointly by multiple institutions across national borders and awards a single qualification through one or more institutions' diploma(s).

505

506

[2] Adapted from Palermo et al.[31]
[3] Adapted from Bamford[5]

507 **Figure 1:** Collaborative programmes types on a continuum of integration and jointness



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