



EU4DUAL ALLIANCE POLICY BRIEF 2026

Dual Higher Education as a Driver of European Competitiveness

9

Partner institutions across 9 EU countries with 74,420 students

18,000+

Business stakeholders in the alliance network

4

2 Accredited Joint Dual Master's programmes, with two further in development

31

Associated partners across industry, government, and European networks

The EU4DUAL Alliance is a unique **European University Alliance** of nine professional higher education institutions across nine EU Member States, coordinated through the EUDUAL University Association AISBL. The alliance's combined student body exceeds 74,000, and its network includes over 18,000 business stakeholders and 31 associated partners across industry, government, and European networks.

Europe's higher education systems face a competitiveness challenge that current policy frameworks are actively addressing but have not yet resolved. The Union of Skills, launched in March 2025, identifies structured work-integrated learning as a priority pathway for closing the gap between graduate competences and employer demand. The European Degree Label, currently in development under the Council resolution of 12 May 2025 with criteria finalisation due by mid-2027 and rollout planned for 2027–2028, will for the first time provide a quality framework for joint transnational programmes but its criteria do not yet address the specific requirements of programmes that integrate workplace learning. The next Erasmus+ programme cycle, currently under preparation for the post-2027 period, offers an opportunity to embed dual higher education mobility within programme rules from the outset rather than retrofitting it.

Dual higher education, integrating academic learning with credit-bearing, quality-assured workplace learning, offers a tested response to Europe's competitiveness challenge and wider societal priorities, building on EU4Dual's earlier focus on the **future of work, the green economy, and healthy living, now taken forward through the Knowledge Valorisation Hubs**. Yet the field remains unevenly developed: no shared European reference framework exists for dual provision at higher education level, cross-border mobility in work placements is impeded by regulatory fragmentation, and approaches to recognition vary across national systems.

Since 2023, **the EU4DUAL Alliance**, bringing together nine professional higher education institutions across nine countries and engaging with a broad stakeholder community through the EU4DUAL University Association AISBL, has served as a collaborative European testbed for dual higher education. Within this context, the alliance has developed and trialled a Dual Higher Education Framework covering seven dimensions of programme design; advanced four joint dual master's programmes, while the alliance's wider dual higher education agenda extends across degree, master's and doctoral levels; developed a DHE Quality Label model for dual provision; and undertaken pilot activity in cross-border work placements, including exploratory action related to transnational apprenticeship mobility.

The alliance's first operational phase (2023–2026) has focused primarily on institution-building, including the establishment of the legal entity, governance arrangements, and the initial tools needed to support cross-border dual education. The second phase (2027–2028) is expected to place greater emphasis on consolidation, implementation, and wider delivery.

The recommendations set out below draw on evidence emerging from the alliance's implementation to date, stakeholder consultation across four governance councils, and analysis of relevant EU policy frameworks. They are organised by governance level.

This policy brief presents the **EU-level and national/regional-level recommendations**. The full policy white paper for 2026 also includes recommendations addressed to the alliance and its member institutions, covering governance, quality assurance, joint programme development and delivery, and stakeholder engagement.

How the recommendations are organised. The eight recommendations in this policy brief are addressed to two governance levels: the **EU level (Recommendations 1–5)** and the **national/regional level (Recommendations 6–8)**. This reflects the architecture of the policy challenge.

EU-level instruments — the European Degree Label, Erasmus+, and the Union of Skills — provide the framework, but they do not currently accommodate the specific requirements of work-integrated learning at higher education level. National and regional systems hold the levers that determine whether EU frameworks translate into operational reality: accreditation criteria, student legal status during workplace periods, and the allocation of structural funds to dual education priorities.

Several recommendations operate as paired actions across these two levels: for example, a European reference framework for dual higher education (Recommendation 1) requires corresponding national legislative provisions (Recommendation 6), and Erasmus+ programme rule adjustments (Recommendation 3) depend on national accreditation systems being equipped to handle dual mobility. The full policy white paper includes a further four recommendations (9–12) addressed to the alliance and its member institutions, covering governance, quality assurance, joint programme development, and stakeholder engagement.

The alliance has made corresponding commitments at institutional level, on the DHE Quality Label, Knowledge Valorisation Hubs, learner support, and long-term governance sustainability, set out in Recommendations 9–12 of the full white paper.

EU LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Establish a European Reference Framework for Dual Higher Education

The alliance invites the Commission to recognise the EU4DUAL DHE Framework, including its ongoing development (see *Recommendation 9, an alliance-level commitment set out in the full white paper*), developed through comparative analysis across nine national systems and currently being piloted through the alliance's joint dual master's programmes — as the reference blueprint for a European Reference Framework for Dual Higher Education, to be established through a non-binding Council Recommendation following the precedent of the 2022 Recommendation on micro-credentials. Such a framework would enable other European University alliances and institutions operating dual provision to adopt common minimum definitional criteria on a voluntary basis, with mutual recognition and comparability of dual provision across Member States developing as a longer-term outcome of adoption. This work should be developed in explicit dialogue with EU VET policy frameworks, including the Osnabrück Declaration and Cedefop's work on apprenticeship quality, so that existing national VET authorisation and training responsibility infrastructure is recognised as a foundation rather than treated as a parallel track.

The EU4DUAL DHE Framework 1.0, covering seven dimensions of programme design, is being piloted across nine institutions.

Recommendation 2

Clarify and Reduce Regulatory Obstacles to Cross-Border Work-Based Learning

The Commission, in coordination with Member States, is invited to clarify and reduce regulatory obstacles to cross-border work-based learning placements, including inconsistent social security coordination under Regulation (EC) No 883/2004, unresolved liability and insurance gaps, and divergent national labour law provisions affecting the status of dual learners during placement periods.

The EU4DUAL Alliance's transnational work placement pilot, currently operational across nine partner countries, is generating primary evidence on these barriers.

Recommendation 3

Align Erasmus+ Programme Rules with Dual Mobility Requirements

The Commission is invited to adjust Erasmus+ mobility rules to accommodate the specific operational requirements of dual higher education. Current rules are designed primarily for academic exchange and do not adequately address structured work-placement calendars, the higher coordination costs of tripartite placements (student, institution, and employer), or the longer lead times required for securing supervised workplace positions in another Member State.

Recommendation 4

Strengthen the European Degree Label Criteria for Programmes with Substantial Work-Integrated Learning.

The Commission (DG EAC) is invited to build on the Label's existing employability and learning-beyond-academia criterion (Dimension B.2) to set specific standards for joint dual programmes with substantial, assessed workplace learning — using the EU4Dual DHE Framework as a reference — so that such programmes can be recognised within the EU-level quality framework without ambiguity over how industry co-certification is treated.

Recommendation 5

Establish a Dedicated Data Monitoring System for Dual Higher Education

The alliance calls upon the European Commission (DG EAC) to support the development of the EU4DUAL Observatory on Dual Higher Education as a European-level data resource, and to explore, within the framework of the European Universities initiative's impact monitoring architecture, mechanisms for integrating Observatory outputs into Commission monitoring of work-integrated learning provision across the initiative. The alliance further invites Cedefop and the European Training Foundation to consider collaborative data-sharing arrangements with the Observatory given their respective mandates on skills and VET monitoring.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 6

Establish or Strengthen National Legal Frameworks for Dual Higher Education

Member States are called upon to establish or strengthen national legal frameworks for dual higher education, addressing as an integrated set: the legal status of dual students during workplace periods, employer obligations towards dual learners, accreditation criteria for dual programmes, and student financial support arrangements.

This recommendation is paired with Recommendation 1 at EU level: a European reference framework requires corresponding national legislative provisions, and the Erasmus+ programme rule adjustments set out in Recommendation 3 depend on national accreditation systems being equipped to handle dual mobility.

Recommendation 7

Align National and Regional Funding Instruments with Dual Higher Education Requirements

Member States and regional authorities are called upon to align national and regional funding instruments with the higher unit costs of dual programme delivery, including employer liaison, placement coordination, and quality assurance of workplace learning. This includes the use of EU structural funds (ESF+ and ERDF) where applicable.

Recommendation 8

Embed Dual Higher Education in Regional Smart Specialisation and Innovation Ecosystem Strategies

Regional authorities are called upon to integrate dual higher education into Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3/S4) priorities and regional innovation ecosystem planning. This includes aligning Knowledge Valorisation Hub themes with regional economic priorities and ensuring that dual higher education institutions are recognised as strategic partners in regional skills development and technology transfer.

WHAT EU4DUAL OFFERS

The alliance is developing tools and generating evidence intended to support both EU and national policy development in dual higher education. These include the DHE Framework 1.0, a structured quality reference covering seven dimensions of programme design, currently being piloted across all nine partner institutions; the Observatory for Dual Higher Education, a biennial survey that will provide the first European-level dataset on work-integrated learning provision, enrolment, and outcomes; a transnational work placement pilot across nine countries, generating primary evidence on cross-border regulatory barriers; and a Quality Label model for dual provision, applying peer-reviewed certification criteria that, following internal validation, the alliance intends to make available to institutions beyond the network.

These tools are offered as resources to the Commission, to national authorities, and to other European University Alliances working on the integration of work-based learning. The alliance welcomes engagement from policymakers and practitioners at all levels.

For the full evidence base and the complete twelve-recommendation set, including institutional-level measures, see the ***EU4DUAL Policy White Paper 2026 working document (QR code below)***.

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