# EDITORIAL — THE SOCIETALLY RELEVANT DUAL HIGHER EDUCATION – EMPOWERING AGENCY IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Dear readers,

It is my great pleasure to introduce the second issue of the *European Scientific Journal for Dual Higher Education*. With this issue, the journal continues its mission to establish a European scholarly platform for research, theory, and practice in dual and work-integrated higher education. As part of the EU4Dual European University Alliance, the journal contributes to a field that is becoming increasingly important for higher education systems, labour markets, regions, and democratic societies.

Dual higher education is often described as a model that connects academic study and professional practice. This is correct, but it is not enough. At its best, dual higher education does more than organise learning across two sites. It brings society into the heart of academic education. It connects universities with companies, public institutions, civil society, regions, and communities. It asks students not only to understand the world, but to act in it, to reflect on it, and to contribute to its transformation. This makes dual higher education one of the most promising laboratories for rethinking the university itself.

In a time shaped by digital transformation, artificial intelligence, sustainability transitions, demographic change, geopolitical uncertainty, and social fragmentation, higher education cannot remain confined to the transmission of established knowledge. Universities must enable learners to act responsibly in open, uncertain, and complex situations. They must foster agency, critical judgement, ethical reflection, collaboration, and the capacity to shape change. These are not additional skills at the margins of academic education. They are becoming central conditions for academic and professional formation.

From this perspective, dual higher education is not merely a response to labour-market needs. It is a model of societal relevance. It shows how academic learning can be embedded in real challenges, how professional practice can become a site of inquiry, and how students can develop competence through experience, reflection, responsibility, and action. No other form of higher education brings society into academic learning with the same structural intensity.

However, if dual higher education is to become a truly European model, it must be researched. It must be described, compared, theorised, evaluated, and critically discussed across countries, disciplines, and institutional traditions. Europe does not yet share one common understanding of dual higher education. The field is shaped by different legal frameworks, historical pathways, pedagogical cultures, labour-market structures, and institutional designs. This diversity is a strength, but only if we develop the concepts and evidence needed to understand it.

This is why research matters. Research helps us make dual higher education mutually intelligible across Europe. It allows us to see what is specific to national systems and what may be transferable across borders. It helps us distinguish between structural arrangements and pedagogical quality, between formal cooperation and meaningful integration, between employability rhetoric and genuine competence development. In this sense, research on dual higher education is also research for European integration. It creates a shared language, a shared evidence base, and

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a shared space for dialogue among universities, employers, regions, policymakers, students, and researchers.

The *European Scientific Journal for Dual Higher Education* was founded precisely for this purpose. It is not only a publication outlet. It is an intellectual infrastructure for an emerging European field. It supports the development of concepts, methods, evidence, and debates that allow dual higher education to become visible as a serious object of scholarship and as a driver of higher education innovation.

The contributions in this issue demonstrate the richness and diversity of this field. They address dual higher education from empirical, conceptual, comparative, strategic, and bibliometric perspectives. Together, they show that dual and work-integrated learning is not a marginal or merely practice-oriented format, but a dynamic area of research with major implications for curriculum design, quality development, competence formation, innovation, and societal transformation.

The opening article by Iraia Urkia-Basterra, Paula Álvarez-Huerta and Ainara Imaz Aguirre examines the development of soft skills in dual higher education master's programmes. By comparing students from education and business, the study highlights both the potential and the differentiated nature of competence development in work-integrated learning contexts. It reminds us that communication, social competence, flexibility, efficacy beliefs, and lifelong learning do not develop automatically. They require intentional pedagogical design, reflective structures, and sensitivity to disciplinary contexts.

The contribution by Ernst Deuer, Thomas Meyer and Kristina Smilyanska turns attention to the quality of practical training phases in dual study programmes. Drawing on long-term student survey data from Germany, the article offers important insights into how students perceive supervision, theory-practice integration, learning opportunities, and framework conditions during workplace phases. The findings underline a central point for the future of dual higher education: the workplace does not become a learning space by itself. It becomes educationally powerful when it is supported by quality, guidance, reflection, and cooperation.

Aisling Hurley's article expands the discussion towards strategic innovation, ethical leadership, and sustainability. By presenting the PBEE framework within work-integrated postgraduate learning, the paper demonstrates how design-led pedagogical scaffolds can support learners in addressing complex organisational and societal challenges. This contribution is particularly relevant because it positions dual higher education as a space for responsible innovation, systems thinking, and transformative capability development.

The article by Michel Bakni and Anna Dupouy provides a valuable country-focused perspective on dual higher education in Denmark. By analysing legal frameworks, applications, and educational pathways, the contribution enriches our understanding of the institutional diversity of dual higher education in Europe. It shows why comparative legal and structural analyses are essential for developing a European knowledge base: without understanding the diversity of systems, we cannot build meaningful common frameworks.

Maite Couto-Ortega, Leire Markuerkiaga and Laida San Sebastian explore the role of dual education programmes in smart specialisation strategies, focusing on Mondragon Unibertsitatea's Faculty of Engineering. Their contribution connects dual higher education with regional innovation, industrial transformation, and strategic development. It illustrates how dual education can act as a bridge between universities, companies, regional ecosystems, and long-term innovation agendas.

Finally, László Péter Juhász contributes a bibliometric analysis of the global intellectual structure of dual and work-integrated higher education. This article is particularly important for the journal's broader mission: it helps map the research field, identify knowledge clusters, and make visible how dual and work-integrated higher education has developed as an international scholarly domain. A field can only mature when it understands its own intellectual structure.

Taken together, the articles in this issue point to a larger agenda. We need research that does not merely ask whether dual higher education "works", but asks how, why, under which conditions, for whom, and with what societal consequences. We need studies that examine learning outcomes, quality conditions, institutional models, regional partnerships, student agency, inclusion, sustainability, digital transformation, and the changing relationship between universities and society. We need comparative research that respects diversity while enabling shared European

understanding. And we need conceptual work that helps us imagine higher education beyond the boundaries of the traditional campus.

The next generation of universities will not be defined by buildings, disciplines, or institutional routines alone. It will be defined by its capacity to connect knowledge with action, learning with responsibility, research with transformation, and students with the real challenges of society. Dual higher education offers one of the most powerful models for this rethinking. It is not the only answer to the future of higher education, but it is one of the most concrete and promising ones.

In this sense, the work of this journal is also a contribution to a new idea of the university: a university that is academically rigorous and socially embedded; research-based and practice-connected; European in outlook and locally engaged; committed to knowledge and to responsibility. A university that does not stand outside society, but learns with society, researches with society, and prepares students to shape society.

As Chief Editor, I would like to thank all authors for their valuable contributions, the reviewers for their careful and constructive work, and the editorial team for their dedication in developing this journal further. Scholarly journals are communities of practice and inquiry. They depend on intellectual generosity, critical dialogue, and a shared commitment to quality. This issue is a strong expression of that commitment.

I hope that the articles collected here will inspire researchers, educators, institutional leaders, policymakers, and practitioners to continue advancing dual higher education as a European field of research, innovation, and transformation.

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