Synthetic drugs are substances manufactured entirely by means of chemicals. They are distinguished from drugs derived from plants, like cocaine and heroin. Common examples of synthetic drugs are amphetamines, methamphetamine and MDMA (ecstasy). In addition, there are the ‘new psychoactive substances’ (NPS), which are psychoactive substances designed to mimic the effects of a controlled drug. Because NPS are newly created, they are not controlled under international law.

The last decade has seen a rapid increase in the trafficking and consumption of synthetic drugs in the EU, and the European market is now estimated to be worth at least €2.5 billion per year. Europe is also a major producer of synthetic drugs, supplying almost all the European market and exporting to countries like Turkey and Australia.

Each year in Europe, around 60 to 90 large-scale production sites are identified, seized and dismantled, and more than 250 small-scale methamphetamine labs are also found. The illicit production of synthetic drugs is expected to increase in Central and Eastern European countries as markets widen and demand increases.

Criminal groups involved in producing synthetic drugs are developing more sophisticated production equipment, with the use of timers, complex electronic parts and computers. They are also using innovative methods to evade detection, such as carrying out the production in series of staged syntheses and making use of ‘mobile laboratory’ facilities. Such developments highlight the need for greater levels of cooperation between law enforcement agencies in the EU.

The Synthetic Drugs module targets law enforcement officers including police, customs and prosecutors engaged in fighting drug crime, in particular the production, smuggling and selling of synthetic drugs. It introduces the main types of synthetic drugs, NPS and related chemicals, and describes their production, trafficking and availability on the internet/darknet. It also covers the investigation of cases.
The module consists of an introduction, eight topic chapters, and a glossary of terms, and abbreviations related to synthetic drugs. In the My Progress section, users can assess their levels of understanding of each of the topics by considering a selection of true/false statements.

The individual chapters are:

1. **Introduction**

2. **Synthetic Drugs**: This chapter describes the main types of synthetic drug: amphetamine, methamphetamine and MDMA.

3. **New Psychoactive Substances**: This chapter summarises the NPS phenomenon, including what NPS are, the challenges they present, and how these challenges are being met.

4. **Chemicals and (Pre-) Precursors**: This chapter provides a brief overview of the substances used in the production of synthetic drugs: chemicals, precursors and pre-precursors.

5. **Production**: This chapter covers the most common manufacturing methods used in the production of synthetic drugs.

6. **Safety Measures**: There are many hazards related to the production and storage of synthetic drugs. This chapter describes the safety measures that should be taken by law enforcement operatives when they work at production sites, storage sites and dumping grounds.

7. ** Trafficking and Organised Crime Groups**: This chapter covers the mechanisms behind the production and distribution of synthetic drugs and the main modus operandi of the crime groups involved.

8. **Investigation and International Cooperation**: This chapter describes different types of investigations regarding synthetic drugs, the different techniques used, and the various kinds of cooperation available to assist and support the investigation.

9. ** Internet and Darknet**: This chapter covers the use of the internet – both surface web and darknet – to facilitate the production, buying, selling and trafficking of synthetic drugs.