

Background Report on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

(July 2014)

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1. Mandate of the expert group

In the Bucharest Communiqué (April 2012), ministers agreed on the following:

„We will allow EQAR-registered agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements. In particular, we will aim to recognise quality assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes. (...)

We encourage higher education institutions to further develop joint programmes and degrees as part of a wider EHEA approach. We will examine national rules and practices relating to joint programmes and degrees as a way to dismantle obstacles to cooperation and mobility embedded in national contexts.”

The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) consequently included in its work programme 2013-2015 the task to:

“Develop a policy proposal for a specific European accreditation approach for Joint programmes, which should be applied to all those Joint programmes that are subject to compulsory programme accreditation at national level.”

The BFUG commissioned a small ad-hoc expert group to draft such a policy proposal, and to report back to the BFUG Working Groups on “Structural Reforms” and “Mobility and Internationalisation”.

The expert group was composed of:

- Mark Frederiks (Structural Reforms WG, The Netherlands)
- Achim Hopbach (Structural Reforms WG, ENQA)

- Andrejs Rauhvargers (Reporting WG, Latvia)
- Colin Tück (Structural Reforms WG, EQAR)

The expert group presented this report and the proposal for a European Approach at several meetings of the BFUG Working Groups on “Structural Reforms” and “Mobility and Internationalisation”, and revised the proposal based on the working groups' feedback. The final report and proposal were submitted to the BFUG in 2014.

2. Introduction

Joint programmes are set up to enhance the mobility of students and staff, to facilitate mutual learning and cooperation opportunities and to create programmes of excellence. Joint degrees express the jointness also in the awarding of the degree.

While in the EHEA the political will to increase the number of joint programmes and joint degrees is evident through various Ministerial Communiqués, the implementation of these initiatives is still hampered by serious problems.

A significant amount of these problems concentrate around issues of recognition and quality assurance (QA). These problems are mainly rooted in the different national legislations in the EHEA and the existing heterogeneity of QA systems in the countries concerned.¹

A number of projects have been initiated to investigate and tackle problems with setting up, quality assuring and recognising joint programmes. An overview of current projects can be found in Annex 6 of the BRIDGE Handbook². Important steps forward regarding the recognition of joint degrees have been made through the development of the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual³, and a report by ENIC-NARICs on fair recognition of joint degrees as an outcome of the ECA project “Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded” (JOQAR)⁴.

Definitions

There is often confusion in the use of terminology regarding joint programmes and degrees. To make it clear from the outset what types of programmes are addressed by this recommendation a definition of the terms is provided. These definitions are in line with Bologna policy documents and are being used, for instance, by the ENIC-NARICs⁵.

Joint programme:

An integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions and leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree.

Joint degree:

A single document awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme and nationally acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme.

¹ ENQA (2012), Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (ENQA workshop report 19)

² Luca Lantero (ed.) (2012), BRIDGE Handbook. Joint programmes and recognition of joint degrees.

³ <http://www.eurorecognition.eu/>

⁴ Axel Aerden & Jenneke Lokhoff (2013), Framework for Fair Recognition of Joint Degrees, ECA Occasional Paper, The Hague. For a description and outcomes of the JOQAR project see: <http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/JOQAR>

⁵ Axel Aerden & Hanna Reczulska (2012), Guidelines for Good Practice for Awarding Joint Degrees. ECA Occasional Paper, The Hague, p. 33-40: 2013.

Multiple degree:

Separate degrees awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme attesting the successful completion of this programme. (If two degrees are awarded by two institutions, this is a 'double degree').

Hence, the common characteristic of joint programmes is that they are offered jointly whilst the degree awarding can be different (double/multiple or joint). Joint degrees are therefore a specific subset of joint programmes, as it applies only to those joint programmes that lead to the award of a joint degree. These distinctions are important because the consequences for the external quality assurance, in particular for accreditation and/or approval of the various types of joint programmes differ significantly.

Numbers

In 2009 the number of joint programmes was estimated by Rauhvargers et al (2009) to be around 2,500 in the EHEA⁶. As a consequence the actual number may now be above 3,000. In a survey results report by Obst et al (2011)⁷ it was found that 84% of responding higher education institutions offered joint programmes. Thirty three per cent of the responding higher education institutions were involved in awarding joint degrees.

Many more joint programmes could, however, be provided as joint degrees if national legislation, accreditation and recognition practices would become more suitable for awarding joint degrees. This proposal aims to serve as one step in dismantling these existing obstacles.

3. Current practices of external quality assurance of joint programmes

Joint programmes challenge the existing national quality assurance systems: institutions from different higher education systems, with different political and legal systems as well as different quality assurance regimes, jointly develop and offer a study programme.

The European higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies accepted this challenge and made a great effort in the last years to analyse the specific issues of quality assurance in joint programmes.

In those cases where all cooperating institutions are subject to obligatory external quality assurance at institutional level only (e.g. institutional audit or accreditation), and thus bear "self-accrediting" powers for their programmes, joint internal quality assurance arrangements for the joint programme can be agreed among them. Institutions have been using, for instance, the Guidelines for Quality Enhancement in European Joint Master Programmes developed by the EUA⁸.

For those cases where quality assurance or accreditation at programme level are required in one or more countries involved, several approaches for joint programmes have been established in the past years: national, joint or single processes.

⁶ Andrejs Rauhvargers, Cynthia Deane & Wilfried Pauwels (2009), Bologna Process Stocktaking Report. Report from working groups appointed by the Bologna Follow-up Group to the Ministerial Conference in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve.

⁷ Daniel Obst, Matthias Kuder & Clare Banks (2011), Joint and Double Degree Programs in the Global Context, Institute of International Education.

⁸ See http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/EMNEM_report.1147364824803.pdf

Several national quality assurance processes

Several national agencies from the countries of the higher education institutions involved quality assure a joint programme in separate processes. Commonly, each agency reviews only the part of the provision offered by the higher education institution(s) in the country that falls under the agency's remit. As a consequence, the assessment of the provision is fragmented (between different agencies and countries), which neglects the crucial characteristic of the programme, namely that it is offered jointly. Furthermore, several agencies and experts review parts of the programme, but the programme as a whole is not evaluated externally. For instance, a joint programme has its learning outcomes defined for the programme as a whole, but in several, fragmented quality assurance processes there is no comprehensive review of the entire programme's curriculum and whether it is fit to achieve these outcomes and objectives. In every process, only a small part of the programme is reviewed, without taking into account the joint programme in its entirety.

From a viewpoint of quality (and of the students enrolled) the quality assurance of a joint programme should cover the entire programme that leads to awarding the degree(s).

Joint quality assurance process

In a joint quality assurance process several agencies work together and agree on a common assessment framework, e.g. by taking one agency's framework and adding additional elements of the other agency/-ies, or by agreeing on a new framework which takes the requirements of all agencies into account.

They can jointly install a panel of experts who will commence a site visit at one location (although in practice visits at two or more locations also occur) resulting in one panel report (although sometimes reporting requirements are so different that two reports are written).

Whilst joint processes have the advantages that they look at the entire programme and avoid duplication in national processes, there are also some setbacks. Experience shows that, especially when agencies cooperate for the first time, comparing frameworks and agreeing on the specifics of the procedure mean quite an investment in time for agencies, experts and the institutions involved. Nearly for every programme a new process needs to be established on an ad-hoc basis, depending on the institutions and countries involved, as there is no standard process. If several locations are visited or multiple reports written, the reduction of costs and efforts is limited.

In addition, problems in the decision-making phase may loom if the agencies attach different conclusions to the results of the joint procedure. It is possible that the cooperating agencies take different quality assurance decisions which may be detrimental for both the institutions and the future cooperation between the agencies.

Single quality assurance procedure

In a single quality assurance procedure there is only one agency and one assessment framework for carrying out the procedure. The framework consists of two building blocks: the European shared component (the "core") and the relevant national components (the "plus").

The European shared component covers the essential standards and criteria that need to be taken into account in all single quality assurance processes, and is based on the ESG and the QF-EHEA. The national components cover additional, particular national requirements. These national components include the elements of the assessment criteria and/or the assessment procedure that need to be included in a quality assurance procedure in a specific national higher education system. One panel is deployed for the assessment of the entire programme and this panel will usually only visit one location of the joint programme.

Nevertheless, the aim is that the results of a single procedure are accepted by all countries where the joint programme is provided. Therefore, the panel writes one report which should be the basis for the quality assurance decisions of the other agencies.

Erasmus Mundus programmes

For joint programmes that have been co-funded by the European Union as part of the Erasmus Mundus programme⁹ (2009-2013), specific external quality reviews were conducted to inform decisions on continued funding. These reviews were carried out with a peer-review methodology and on the basis of processes and criteria specifically established by the responsible EU authorities for those reviews. These reviews, however, were not intended to replace obligatory evaluation or accreditation of the Erasmus Mundus joint programme as required by national legislations. The reviews thus took place in addition to the “statutory” external QA, rather than being seen itself to fulfil that purpose.

4. Lessons Learnt

Today one can rely on ample experience with quality assurance of joint programmes. Two main lessons learnt are as follows:

The design of the procedure

In principle, part II of the ESG is applicable to quality assurance of joint programmes. Experience clearly shows that the conduct of quality assurance of joint programmes in itself does not constitute the problem many HEIs are facing in particular when it comes to the accreditation of joint programmes. ESG are applied widely in the EHEA and national specificities in the conduct of quality assurance processes are within acceptable boundaries.

The criteria

What remains the major impediment for both cooperating institutions and agencies are rather the national regulations for approval of the different joint programmes and, thus, the additional national criteria that need to be applied. This is the clear outcome of the above mentioned JOQAR, the most profound project on quality assurance of joint programmes.

Remaining Obstacles

Various evaluations of quality assurance of joint programmes led to a positive conclusion on the use of shared European standards and criteria (based on ESG, QF-EHEA and ECTS).

With regard to the additional national criteria it was concluded that these should be removed when assessing joint programmes in single quality assurance processes. Agencies and experts agreed that these additional national criteria were not suitable for assessing joint programmes and in many cases made the development of such programmes impossible.¹⁰

The following examples can be given of such additional, national requirements that currently constitute obstacles in particular in common assessment processes for joint programmes. The list is based on the JOQAR project, which covered 9 countries from the EHEA: Belgium (Flanders), Czech Republic, France, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Portugal.

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http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/results_compendia/selected_projects_action_1_master_courses_en.php

¹⁰ Thomas Blanc de la Carrere and Mark Frederiks (2013), “Single Accreditation of Joint Programmes: Pilots Evaluation Report”, ECA, The Hague.

- National QA agencies which are not allowed to coordinate an international procedure or undertake a site visit abroad (although the coordinating institution that provides the joint degree is located in another country)
- Substantial changes that have occurred since the last accreditation (curriculum, subjects, staff, etc.), must be stated and described in the reaccreditation application (Czech Republic)
- The report by the experts has to be translated in the national language (Lithuania)
- A specific assessment scale is necessary:
 - o This translated document needs to follow the six areas included in the Lithuanian framework and each of these six areas shall be assessed on a four-point scale (Lithuania)
 - o The assessment panel needs to come to a general conclusion regarding the joint programme. This general conclusion is either unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent and needs to be weighted and substantiated (The Netherlands)
- Specific requirements regarding handicapped students and equal opportunity (Germany)
- Formal requirements regarding ECTS:
 - o A Master's qualification requires 300 ECTS credits including the preceding programmes for the first qualification for entry into a profession (Germany)
 - o Second cycle studies take at least 90 ECTC (Poland)
 - o The number of ECTS credits attributed to the joint master's programme must be in the range from 90 to 120 credits (Portugal)
 - o The Master's dissertation should range from 15 to 30 ECTS credits (Germany),
 - o the curriculum should include an original dissertation or project, worth at least 35% of the total number of credit units (e.g. 42 credits in a programme of 120 credits) (Portugal) – as can easily be seen, these requirements are contradictory.
 - o A module is generally concluded with one examination and should account for at least five ECTS credits (Germany)
 - o Specific requirements regarding the curriculum (Lithuania): a semester should consist of not more than 5 subjects (with a minimum of 3 ECTS per subject). This poses a problem if a programme wants to offer e.g. 6 subjects with 5 ECTS in a semester.
- Specific requirements regarding staff:
 - o The joint programme has its „guarantee“(coordinator) at the Czech partner institution. This refers to a professor or an associate professor who is a full-time employee at the institution and not more than half-time employed at some other institution and whose research and publishing activities are closely connected to the specific joint programme¹¹ (Czech Republic)
 - o The study programme is provided by the staff meeting legal requirements (Lithuania)
 - o At least 50 per cent of the academic FTEs allotted to the provision (*of the part(s) that are provided by the Norwegian institution(s)*) must be members of the institution's own academic staff. Of these, professors (full or associate) must be represented among those who teach the core elements of the provision¹² (Norway)

¹¹ Note: If the professor/associate professor is employed at different institutions and the total time is more than 70hrs/week, then s/he can be counted as a PhD holder, not a habilitated teacher.

- The minimum core staff consists of at least six teachers which hold the academic title of professor or doktor habilitowany and six teachers which hold the academic degree of Ph.D (Poland)¹³
- The majority of the academic staff must hold a PhD degree (for a joint master's programme offered with a Portuguese university) or be a PhD holder or a specialist (for a joint master's programme offered with a Portuguese polytechnic) (Portugal)
- Specific requirements regarding the achievement of learning outcomes¹⁴ (Flanders and the Netherlands).

Undoubtedly many more examples from other countries can be given. The list is not exhaustive and presents only examples which can easily be complemented by examples from other countries in the EHEA.

Specific national criteria are sometimes in contradiction with other national criteria, as can be clearly seen in the case of different national ECTS requirements. Moreover, such very detailed criteria – which sometimes only make sense within the national context – are very difficult to evaluate for international experts. Although a few countries allow that these specific criteria do not have to be applied if these are conflicting with criteria in other countries, this often requires a separate administrative procedure and causes uncertainty for the institutions and agencies involved. Some of the requirements significantly limit the flexibility that is deliberately granted by what has been agreed in the Bologna Process (e.g. QF-EHEA), and are thus difficult to justify, especially for joint programmes.

The problems are even more significant for those HEIs that have to obtain compulsory accreditation for joint programmes. Since accreditation decisions are in most of the cases statutory acts and, thus bound to national legal requirements, these decisions need to be taken in all countries where the institutions that provide the joint programme are based. Although a single accreditation procedure means that these decisions can be taken on the basis of one and the same experts' report, it still requires multiple national administrative procedures to apply for accreditation by the institutions involved. There is hence a risk that multiple accreditation decisions do not point in the same direction.

In some countries accreditation decisions are of a binary nature (positive or negative) whilst in other countries there are also other possibilities (e.g. conditional accreditation). This means that in one country the decision could be conditional, whilst in another country it could be either positive or negative, depending on how serious the shortcomings are perceived by that national agency.

In addition, different accreditation periods apply, e.g. in some countries the accreditation is valid for 6 years, in other countries accreditation periods may vary from 4 to 10 years. Variety in the duration of accreditation makes it more difficult to plan single accreditation processes.

¹² For the different cycles specific demands apply: For first cycle provision, at least 20 per cent of the relevant discipline community/-ies must have competence as professors (full or associate); For second cycle provision, at least 10 per cent of the relevant discipline community/-ies must be full professors, and an additional 40 per cent associate professors; For third cycle provision, PhD or stipend programme for artistic development work, at least 50 per cent of the relevant discipline community/-ies must be full professors, and the rest associate professors.

¹³ The members of the minimum core staff have to be full-time employees of the higher education institution that offers the joint programme, and at least since the beginning of the semester. This institution has to be their primary employment. Each member of the minimum core staff has to teach at least 30 (for a professor or doktor habilitowany) or 60 hours of class during the academic year and within the programme.

¹⁴ The assessment panel should select, randomly and differentiated by marks achieved, fifteen students from a list of graduates for the last two completed academic years. For each student selected, the panel examines the meaningful students' work, including the completed and signed assessment forms.

5. Conclusion

Especially in those countries where programmes have to be approved by accreditation bodies or ministries, different national legislation and formal criteria represent one major obstacle for the development of joint programmes and, in particular, joint degrees.

Such specific and sometimes contradictory national requirements inhibit cooperation in the development and quality assurance of joint programmes. Moreover, they cause a situation where quality assurance of joint programmes is often fragmented: different quality assurance agencies each look at the provision in their country, but not at the programme as a whole – its “jointness” is thus neglected.

At the same time, the approaches developed and piloted by QA agencies and stakeholders (see above) have demonstrated that the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) together form a sound basis for QA of joint programmes.

The expert group, therefore, proposed a European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, consisting of a set of shared European standards and criteria, to be adopted by EHEA ministers. The European Approach would help address the existing difficulties described in the present report and should be based exclusively on the ESG and the QF-EHEA, representing the agreed European framework, without additional national criteria.