European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

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Joint programmes are a hallmark of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). They are set up to enhance the mobility of students and staff, to facilitate mutual learning and cooperation opportunities and to create programmes of excellence. They offer a genuine European learning experience to students. Joint degrees express the "jointness" also in the awarding of the degree.

The present European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has been developed to ease external quality assurance of these programmes. In particular, it will:

- dismantle an important obstacle to the development of joint programmes by setting standards for these programmes that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria, and
- facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes that genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character.

The EHEA is characterised by a diversity of approaches to external QA, including accreditation, evaluation or audit at the level of study programmes and/or institutions. While responding to the needs and requirements of their respective context, these different approaches find their "common denominator" in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The ESG apply to quality assurance procedures of joint programmes as to all other types of programmes. Thus, the European Approach is mainly based on the ESG and on the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). In addition, the European Approach takes into account the distinctive features of a joint programme and, thus, specifies the 'standard' approach accordingly. The procedure and criteria are closely based on those developed and tested within the JOQAR project.

"Joint programmes" are understood as an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from EHEA countries[1], and leading to double/multiple degrees[2] or a joint degree[3].

[1] This proposal relates only to joint programmes offered jointly by higher education institutions from two or more countries, and does not address the quality assurance of programmes delivered jointly by different institutions from a single country.

[2] 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').

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

A. Application in Different Systems of External QA

The European Approach should be applied depending on the needs of the cooperating higher education institutions and the requirements of their national frameworks:

- If some of the **cooperating higher education institutions require external quality assurance at programme level** (e.g. programme accreditation or evaluation is mandatory), then the cooperating institutions should select a suitable quality assurance agency[4] from the list of EQAR-registered agencies.

  The agency will use the Standards (part B) and the Procedure (part C) to carry out a single evaluation or accreditation of the entire joint programme. The result is to be accepted in all EHEA countries. Dependent on the national legal framework, the external quality assurance decision should come into force or be recognised in all countries where the programme is offered, as agreed in the Bucharest Communiqué.

- If **all cooperating higher education institutions** are subject to **external quality assurance at institutional level** only and have "self-accrediting" status, they may use the European Approach in setting up joint internal approval and monitoring processes for their joint programmes (according to ESG 1.2 & 1.9), if they deem it useful in their context.

  Hence, in these cases no additional external evaluation or accreditation procedures at the programme level are necessary.

- The European Approach may also be used for joint programmes that are offered by higher education institutions from both within and outside the EHEA. Involved institutions from non-EHEA countries are encouraged to inquire whether their national authorities would accept the Standards (part B) and be able to recognise the decision of an EQAR-registered agency, if applicable.

B. Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA

1. Eligibility

1.1 Status

The institutions that offer a joint programme should[5] be recognised as higher education institutions by the relevant authorities of their countries. Their respective national legal frameworks should enable them to participate in the joint programme and, if applicable, to award a joint degree. The institutions awarding the degree(s) should ensure that the degree(s) belong to the higher education degree systems of the countries in which they are based.

1.2 Joint design and delivery

The joint programme should be offered jointly, involving all cooperating institutions in the design and delivery of the programme.

[4] In the case of joint programmes that lead to qualifications aiming to satisfy the minimum agreed training conditions in a profession subject to the European Union Directive 2005/36/EC, the joint programme would need to be notified to the European Commission by the competent authority of one EU Member State. The cooperating institutions will need to bear this in mind when identifying and contacting an agency to conduct the review.

[5] The Standards use of the common English usage of "should" which has the connotation of prescription and compliance.

1.3 Cooperation Agreement

The terms and conditions of the joint programme should be laid down in a cooperation agreement. The agreement should in particular cover the following issues:

- Denomination of the degree(s) awarded in the programme
- Coordination and responsibilities of the partners involved regarding management and financial organisation (including funding, sharing of costs and income etc.)
- Admission and selection procedures for students
- Mobility of students and teachers
- Examination regulations, student assessment methods, recognition of credits and degree awarding procedures in the consortium.

2. Learning Outcomes

2.1 Level [ESG 1.2]

The intended learning outcomes should align with the corresponding level in the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA), as well as the applicable national qualifications framework(s).

2.2 Disciplinary field

The intended learning outcomes should comprise knowledge, skills, and competencies in the respective disciplinary field(s).

2.3 Achievement [ESG 1.2]

The programme should be able to demonstrate that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

2.4 Regulated Professions

If relevant for the specific joint programme, the minimum agreed training conditions specified in the European Union Directive 2005/36/EC, or relevant common trainings frameworks established under the Directive, should be taken into account.

3. Study Programme [ESG 1.2]

3.1 Curriculum

The structure and content of the curriculum should be fit to enable the students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

3.2 Credits

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) should be applied properly and the distribution of credits should be clear.

3.3 Workload

A joint bachelor programme will typically amount to a total student workload of 180-240 ECTS-credits; a joint master programme will typically amount to 90-120 ECTS-credits and should not be less than 60 ECTS-credits at second cycle level (credit ranges according to the FQ-EHEA); for joint doctorates there is no credit range specified.

The workload and the average time to complete the programme should be monitored.

4. Admission and Recognition [ESG 1.4]

4.1. Admission

The admission requirements and selection procedures should be appropriate in light of the programme's level and discipline.

4.2. Recognition

Recognition of qualifications and of periods of studies (including recognition of prior learning) should be applied in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and subsidiary documents.

5. Learning, Teaching and Assessment [ESG 1.3]

5.1 Learning and teaching

The programme should be designed to correspond with the intended learning outcomes, and the learning and teaching approaches applied should be adequate to achieve those. The diversity of students and their needs should be respected and attended to, especially in view of potential different cultural backgrounds of the students.

5.2 Assessment of students

The examination regulations and the assessment of the achieved learning outcomes should correspond with the intended learning outcomes. They should be applied consistently among partner institutions.

6. Student Support [ESG 1.6]

The student support services should contribute to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. They should take into account specific challenges of mobile students.

7. Resources [ESG 1.5 & 1.6]

7.1 Staff

The staff should be sufficient and adequate (qualifications, professional and international experience) to implement the study programme.

7.2 Facilities

The facilities provided should be sufficient and adequate in view of the intended learning outcomes.

8. Transparency and Documentation [ESG 1.8]

Relevant information about the programme like admission requirements and procedures, course catalogue, examination and assessment procedures etc. should be well documented and published by taking into account specific needs of mobile students.

9. Quality Assurance [ESG 1.1 & part 1]

The cooperating institutions should apply joint internal quality assurance processes in accordance with part one of the ESG.

C. Procedure for External Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA

The cooperating institutions should jointly select a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency. The agency should communicate appropriately with the competent

national authorities of the countries in which the cooperating higher education institutions are based.

1. Self-Evaluation Report [ESG 2.3]

The external quality assurance procedure should[6] be based on a self- evaluation report (SER) jointly submitted by the cooperating institutions. The SER should contain comprehensive information that demonstrates the compliance of the programme with the Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA (part B).

In addition, the report should contain the necessary information about the respective national frameworks of the cooperating institutions that foreign agencies and experts might need in order to appreciate the context, especially the positioning of the programme within the national higher education systems.

The SER should focus explicitly on the distinctive feature of the joint programme as a joint endeavour of higher education institutions from more than one national higher education system.

2. Review Panel [ESG 2.3 & 2.4]

The agency should appoint a panel of at least four members. The panel should combine expertise in the relevant subject(s) or discipline(s), including the labour market/world of work in the relevant field(s), and expertise in quality assurance in higher education.

Through their international expertise and experience the panel should be able to take into account the distinctive features of the joint programme. Collectively, the panel should possess knowledge of the HE systems of the HEIs involved and the language(s) of instruction used. The panel should include members from at least two countries involved in the consortium providing the programme. The panel should include at least one student.

The agency should ensure the impartiality of the experts and observes fairness towards the applying higher education institutions. To this end, the institutions should have the right to raise well-grounded objections against a panel member, but not a right to veto their appointment.

The agency should brief the experts on the review activity, their specific role, and the specifics of the quality assurance procedure. The briefing should focus particularly on the distinctive features of a joint programme.

3. Site Visit [ESG 2.3]

The site visit should enable the review panel to discuss the joint programme based on the self-evaluation report and assess whether the programme complies with the Standards (part B).

The site visit should therefore include discussions with representatives of all cooperating institutions and in particular the management of the institutions and the programme, the staff, the students, and other relevant stakeholders, such as alumni and the professional field.

Although the site visit should normally be restricted to one location, the provision at all locations has to be taken into account.

4. Review Report [ESG 2.3 & 2.6]

The review panel should prepare a report that contains relevant evidence, analysis and conclusions with regard to the Standards (part B). The report should also contain

[6] The Procedure uses of the common English usage of “should” which has the connotation of prescription and compliance.

recommendations for developing the programme further. In case the review results in a formal outcome the review panel should make a recommendation for the decision.

The conclusions and recommendations should pay particular attention to the distinctive features of the joint programme.

The institutions should have the opportunity to comment on a draft version of the review report and request correction of factual errors.

5. Formal Outcomes and Decision [ESG 2.5]

If required, the agency should take a decision on the basis of the review report and the recommendation for the decision, considering the comments by the higher education institutions as appropriate. In case the review results in an accreditation decision, it grants or denies the accreditation (with or without conditions), based on the Standards (part B). The agency may supplement the formal outcome and the accreditation decision by recommendations.

The agency should give reasons for its accreditation decision. This applies in particular for accreditation decisions limited by conditions or negative decisions and for cases where the decision differs from the review panel's conclusions and recommendation for the decision.

6. Appeals [ESG 2.7]

The institutions should have the right to appeal against a formal outcome or an accreditation decision. Therefore, the agency should have a formalised appeals procedure in place.

7. Reporting [ESG 2.6]

The agency should publish the review report and, if applicable, the formal outcome or the accreditation decision on its website. In case the review was not conducted in English at least an English summary of the review report and an English version of the decision, including its reasons, should be published.

8. Follow-up [ESG 2.3]

The agency should agree with the cooperating institutions a follow-up procedure to assess the fulfilment of conditions – if applicable – and/or to evaluate the follow-up actions on recommendations – if applicable.

9. Periodicity [ESG 1.10]

The joint programme should be reviewed periodically every 6 years, which should be specified in the published decision. If there is an accreditation decision it should be granted – if the decision is positive – for a period of 6 years.[7] During the 6-year period, the agency should be informed about changes in the consortium offering the joint programme.

[7] A period of 6 years is widely applied in EHEA countries.