
QUALITY ASSURANCE OF JOINT PROGRAMMES

MARK FREDERIKS, JOSEP GRIFOLL, KIRSI HILTUNEN, ACHIM HOPBACH



WORKSHOP
REPORT

19

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Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission in the framework of the Lifelong Learning programme. This publication reflects the views of the authors only and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

ISBN 978-952-5539-60-8 (paperbound)

ISBN 978-952-5539-61-5 (pdf)

ISSN 1458-106X

The present report can be downloaded from the ENQA website at
<http://www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso>

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Cover design and page layout: Eija Vierimaa
Edited by Nathalie Lugano

Brussels, Belgium, 2012

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FOREWORD

Joint degree programmes have been on top of the ministerial agenda from the beginning of the Bologna process. Although several projects at the European level have been carried out to analyse the specific challenges related to the quality assurance of joint programmes and to develop methodologies for their evaluation, no specific European quality assurance approach has been formally implemented yet.

In view of the Bologna ministerial conference to be held in April 2012 in Bucharest, ENQA organised a seminar in September 2011 on Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in collaboration with the Austrian Accreditation Council (ÖAR). The purpose of this seminar was twofold: first, to analyse the experience already gained in quality assurance of joint programmes as regards specific issues and methodological approaches, and second, to make recommendations to the ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area.

This report highlights the results of three projects, undertaken since 2004 and presented at the ENQA seminar in Vienna, to illustrate the width of experience that quality assurance agencies have in the quality assurance of joint programmes. The articles clearly show that what remains the major impediment for the agencies is not the conduct of QA of joint programmes in itself, but rather the national regulations for approval of the different joint programmes.

To overcome the difficulties created by the different national regulations for approval of joint programmes, ENQA urges the ministers to authorise a specific European accreditation approach for joint programmes to be applied to all those joint programmes that are subject to compulsory programme accreditation at the national level. Such an approach would undeniably constitute a major step forward in the evaluation of joint programmes and bolster the efforts made so far in this particular domain of quality assurance in higher education. ENQA would be honoured to be invited to play an active role in the endeavour of developing a European approach to joint programme accreditation.

Achim Hopbach

President

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

INTRODUCTION

Joint degree programmes, as a means to facilitate mobility of students, have been a priority in the Bologna process agenda and were given increasing attention in the past 10 years. Their implementation was raised at most of the ministerial conferences since the Bologna Declaration and followed up in the stocktaking exercises of 2007 and 2009. According to the ministers responsible for Higher Education in the EHEA, such programmes should become more common practice.

Despite the great challenge to evaluate joint programmes due to their intrinsic nature, the European quality assurance agencies strove in the last years for analysing the issues of quality assurance in joint degree programmes and developing specific methods for the external QA of such programmes.

The most important projects in this field, most of them presented in this publication, are the *Transnational European Evaluation Projects I and II (TEEP I and II)* conducted by ENQA, *Joint Master's Programmes – Joint Evaluations: A Nordic Challenge* by the Nordic Quality Assurance Network, and the work done by the European Consortium for Accreditation, not the least in the field of mutual recognition. In addition, it is worth mentioning the *European Master's New Evaluation Methodology (EMNEM)* developed by EUA.

These initiatives demonstrate that quality assurance agencies can rely on ample experience. However, much still remains to be done in the field of QA of joint programmes to overcome the numerous problems related to accreditation and recognition hampering the further development of joint programmes. The main challenge lies in the differences between national systems and legal frameworks regarding the approval of programmes. This does not count for national specifications in the field of quality assurance processes which are generally in line with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* and, thus, do not cause difficulties.

In facing up to this challenge, it is important to agree upon the essential elements needed for the approval and mutual recognition of joint programmes and avoid unnecessary duplication regarding the quality assurance procedures.

This report gives advice concerning the methodology to adopt for QA of joint programmes and the aspects that need to be taken into account when planning joint evaluations.

The projects presented in this report show that a common European accreditation mechanism for joint programmes is necessary and possible (in those countries where compulsory accreditation schemes are in place), and that the design of transnational quality assurance methodologies is perfectly viable. Building a common approach would certainly be highly beneficial for all stakeholders involved. Indeed, the joint programme sector offers a unique platform to further boost the development of the EHEA. This objective can be achieved only if areas of common legislation at the European level are identified in order to facilitate the evaluation processes.

CHAPTER 1:

A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF THE TRANSNATIONAL EUROPEAN EVALUATION PROJECT (TEEP II) AND IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Josep Grifoll, Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya)

This article offers a retrospective focus on the TEEP II project¹ on quality assurance of Erasmus Mundus joint programmes launched by ENQA in 2004. The TEEP II project was coordinated by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket) and involved five other QA agencies, NVAO, QAA, HAC, CNE and AQU Catalunya, plus one representative from the EUA and the ENIC-NARIC network. The methodology followed the framework set out by the Bologna process which had been developed up until that time, together with the experience of external quality assurance in each of the six countries. At that time, very little experience of external quality assurance had been shared at the international level. What was the added value of the project in terms of methodology? This was clearly the tools that were incorporated to evaluate the effectiveness of the culture of jointness in the higher education sector. Part of the experience gained from this project would also presumably have served in the process of drawing up the ESG.

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY DEFINITION

It is important for the reader to question what a “joint programme” exactly means. Answering this is crucial, especially to understand how a quality assurance process for such programmes is structured and organised.

In the development of the TEEP II project, the definition of joint programme given in the European Union’s Erasmus Mundus programme was used. These are high quality integrated master’s programmes offered by international consortia of universities with cross-border student mobility².

The benefit of the TEEP II project is that, through the framework of Erasmus Mundus, one QA methodology can be applied to three very different master’s programmes. Although they all share the idea of interdisciplinarity as an intrinsic value of quality, the three programmes have different subject areas: COMUNDUS³ (Media, Communication and Social Studies), EMLE⁴ (Law and Economics), and EUROAQUAE⁵ (Hydro-informatics and water management).

The three programmes also had a different ECTS credit volume: 90 ECTS for COMUNDUS, 60 ECTS for EMLE and 120 ECTS for EUROAQUAE. In other words, TEEP II is capable of formulating one methodological proposal that is applicable to several configurations. This is highly interesting as one of the barriers to the development of full

1 <http://www.enqa.eu/projectitem.lasso?id=108&cont=pastprojDetail>

2 http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/programme/action1_en.php

3 <http://www.comundus.net>

4 <http://www.emle.org>

5 <http://www.euroaquae.eu>

European integration in the quality assurance and public recognition of higher education lies in the differences in national regulations and requirements concerning structural aspects of degree programmes, for example the number of ECTS.

It should be emphasised that the TEEP II project was based on the assumption that the Erasmus Mundus master's programmes were selected according to a process in which the keynote was the high quality of the proposals. On the basis of this premise, the objective of the methodological development of the TEEP II project was to promote institutional debate on the concept of "jointness" and interaction among reviewers in order to identify areas for quality enhancement. This orientation was in fact necessary given that, at the time when TEEP II was being implemented, the masters' proposals were undergoing an international review for the very first time.

The methodology designed in TEEP II is compact and consistent; it provides relevant quantitative and identification information on the programme and then looks into how the mechanisms for cooperation, the level of programme (descriptors) and its quality assurance system are developed.

METHODOLOGY AND POSSIBLE TOOLS FOR THE FUTURE

The analysis of this methodology as applied to TEEP II should enable us to verify its viability as a starting point for a comprehensive proposal at European level.

Firstly, in relation to public information on the programme, all Internet-related tools need to be upgraded, in particular the websites of the teaching consortia, which need to set out quality information on the programme. One can only speculate on the need for these websites, aside from providing information on the academic orientation of the programme, to provide up-to-date quantitative figures on the profile and activities of the students and teachers. **Could this be a platform for testing a system of European indicators?**

Cooperation mechanisms make up the second part of the TEEP II evaluation methodology. Without going into details about the cooperation mechanisms that are fundamental in the management of joint programmes, such as the arrangements for student mobility within the programme or the language policy, TEEP II deals with aspects linked to resource management and funding that may well call for good practices on incentives. The existence of high quality joint European programmes, as set out in the objectives of Erasmus Mundus, requires adequate public funding that is often considerable. The sustainability of these programmes lies in the additional provision of resources. In other words, should joint European programmes that are not of high quality be funded? **Can we transform this question into a pilot test evaluation aimed at making this high quality more transparent?**

The academic level and content of programmes form the third part of the TEEP II methodology. This includes, in close connection with the cooperation mechanisms, the evaluation of what is a programme's added value, a point which requires ex-ante evaluation, plus evaluation whilst the programme is running. The concept of added value is a tricky one; one can of course refer to the availability of a new product or service that complements the existing provision, but a programme should clearly be evaluated on the basis of its impact. This brings us back to the question raised above of the excellence of this type of programme. I am not talking about excellence based on compliance with standards - ideally, these joint European programmes should anticipate the development of new standards in higher education in the coming years, especially with regard to the defining and achievement of learning outcomes.

Lastly, the TEEP II methodology incorporates a section on quality assurance where the culture of jointness is discussed. University consortia that manage joint programmes need to integrate quality assurance practices so that only one system is established. The approach that is introduced in TEEP II of **encouraging common structures for quality assurance opens up an entirely new dimension if it is developed appropriately**. In fact, it paves the way to simplification of the external review and the possibility of international review.

These are interesting lessons learned that can enable progress to be made in the framing of European policy for the quality assurance of joint programmes.

The quality assurance methodology needs a particular approach to deal with the constituent processes of joint programmes. The ex-ante evaluation process will obviously need to be rigorous, although one should bear in mind that **planning is one thing, but the programme being actually up and running is another: the time frame between the two is long. Right at the very beginning**, when the programme starts to run, **it is highly desirable to have mechanisms in place that help to identify enhancement opportunities and to implement corresponding measures**.

This lesson learned should enable a reassessment to be made of the processes of accreditation and the recognition of excellence during the initial stage of the programme.

When joint programmes were evaluated in the TEEP II project, the use of what are today known as Internet-based social networks was at a very early stage. Some of the best known today did not even exist. It is therefore essential that the definition of quality for this type of transnational programme takes into account **the appropriate integration of these online-based tools and social networks with regard to teaching and learning strategies and quality assurance**.

The coordination mechanisms need to be defined but, more particularly, they need to work. Internal and external evaluation processes need to observe what the practice is in this field. On the other hand, the coordination mechanisms are not just tools for the effective management of the programme, but also opportunities for developing cooperation agreements associated with the joint programme itself, for example, on the exchange of academic staff. Setting in place strategies of this type further increases the added value provided by the programme.

Lastly, it is worth **highlighting how valuable the presence of international students on programmes of this type is when taking into account the quality** of these programmes. While it is common to believe that the management of different administrative matters, such as student accommodation and residence permits, is highly important, a good quality assurance system should encourage student participation in aspects associated with the quality of teaching in the programme. It is not of particular interest that students on joint programmes rate the opportunity to travel and live in other cultures as the main added value of these transnational programmes. In the same way, international stakeholders should be involved as agents who help to expand the added value of joint programmes, particularly in the sphere of collaboration between programmes and professional practice.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the demands made by the participating institutions at the end of the review stage was accreditation by ENQA. At that time, the TEEP II methodology was not set up for this purpose, but the possibility of being able to construct a European accreditation mechanism for joint programmes would be highly beneficial. In order to achieve such an important objective, areas of common legislation at European level which facilitate the

evaluation and accreditation process need to be identified. Coming back to the questions raised earlier about the definition and justification for the existence and public funding of joint programmes: are external review mechanisms needed to ensure the added value of this type of programmes and to safeguard their subsistence? Will they be necessary for reinforcing their transparency or promoting excellence?

Whatever the case, from this retrospective look at the TEEP II project, one can conclude that the design of transnational methodologies is perfectly viable, and that the joint programme sector offers an unparalleled platform to move forward in the development of the EHEA, and particularly for making proposals which open up new dimensions in quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education.

CHAPTER 2:

JOINT MASTER'S PROGRAMMES – JOINT EVALUATIONS: A NORDIC CHALLENGE

Kirsi Hiltunen, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC)

This paper concerns lessons learned from a Nordic project “Joint Master’s Programmes”⁶, which was implemented in 2008–2009 in all Nordic countries⁷ under the auspices of the Nordic Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NOQA) and with the participation of five Nordic QA agencies (ACE Denmark, EVA, FINHEEC, Höskoleverket and NOKUT). The main purpose of the project was to develop and present a model or alternative models for joint evaluation of joint Nordic master’s programmes. The project also offered an opportunity for the participating QA agencies to develop a profound understanding of each other’s national QA criteria and methods. The project was financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers, and the project group was appointed by NOQA and involved members from all above-mentioned Nordic QA agencies.

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Since 2007, the Nordic Council of Ministers has had a funding instrument called “The Nordic Master Programme”, which is considered to be the Nordic Flagship for the promotion of higher education in the Nordic countries, i.e. to stimulate cooperation between Nordic higher education institutions on the development of joint master’s programmes of high international quality that will attract both Nordic and non-Nordic students. A total of 16 programmes have been selected in the three calls for applications. Each selected programme is allocated 1 million DKK (~135,000 €) for the development and implementation of the programme. Programmes have to come from a subject area within a Nordic area of excellence, and they have to be two-year (120 ECTS) programmes that result in a joint or double degree. In addition, there must be at least three Nordic countries involved in the consortium. It was two of these programmes that the evaluation project, discussed in this paper, reviewed and piloted its methodology on. The outcome of the project was twofold: on the one hand, a report to the Nordic Council of Ministers on evaluation methodology, and on the other hand, reports to the two programmes on the quality of their educational and QA activities.

The project was implemented well in line with the European development. It was taken for granted that the general pattern of the evaluation would follow the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG). Many of the points raised in EUA’s European Master’s New Evaluation Methodology and TEEP II were useful in the preparation of the evaluation criteria and project report.

The project group got a mandate by the Nordic Council of Ministers to firstly investigate QA practices and legislation with regard to QA and joint master’s programmes in the Nordic countries. At the beginning of the project, the project group also made an attempt to find out the number and types of joint Nordic master’s programmes through a questionnaire sent to all universities in the Nordic countries,

⁶ Final report (incl. a report on the pilot evaluations) is available on NOQA’s web page: www.nokut.no/noqa.

⁷ Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

except Iceland. The answers demonstrated that, unfortunately, there was scant knowledge of the situation at the institutional level.

IMPLICATIONS OF NATIONAL QA SYSTEMS FOR JOINT PROGRAMME ASSESSMENT

It was not surprising at all to find out that the general methodology applied by the QA agencies in the Nordic countries resemble each other. This is due partly to a tradition of cooperation and information-sharing among the agencies responsible for national QA of higher education. Naturally, the ESG have also been instrumental in this respect. Consequently, all five countries use similar methodology, which includes self-evaluation, expert panels and public reports. Reviews are in the form of programme and subject evaluations, thematic evaluations, quality audits, accreditation-like practices and awards for excellence in higher education.

However, it was overwhelming to notice that the national QA systems seemed to be moving in two different directions, and in this process, very little consideration appeared to be taken of the development in the other Nordic countries. The different emphases and national requirements created problems as regards the joint programmes in the different countries as well as in finding common denominators for joint evaluation. In particular, the substantial revision of the national QA systems in Denmark and Sweden were complicating factors. Denmark, Sweden and to some extent also Iceland could be seen as “controlling” countries, whereas Finland and Norway as countries where national QA systems could be seen based on trust on higher education institutions and respecting their autonomy.

Thus, what were the premises for joint programme assessment? Firstly, as stated above, there were major differences between the systems of QA in higher education and the systems seemed to be diverging even more, opposite of what was anticipated earlier e.g. by Stensaker-Danø (2006) *Nordisk kvalitetssikring av høyere utdanning*. Arbeidsnotat 16/2006 NIFU STEP. Secondly, there was no reliable information either of the number or types of joint programmes on a national basis (nor at an institutional level) except for the Erasmus Mundus grantees. Thirdly, by 2008, there had been no systematic external evaluation of joint programmes in the Nordic countries. Lastly, legislation with regard to joint degrees varied.

It was felt strongly that there was a great need of joint evaluation of joint Nordic master’s programmes in order to secure the interest of students in these programmes, and that these evaluations should concern each programme as a unit and be carried out by one expert team and result in one report. It had become obvious to the project group that no joint evaluation and, in particular, no accreditation could take place without more or less far-reaching agreements between the countries and changes in legislation. But it was not seen as part of the project to propose such changes.

THREE ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Based on the information that was collected and on the experiences gained through the pilot evaluations, the project group proposed three alternative approaches for the QA of joint Nordic master’s programmes:

Joint evaluation by one expert team followed by joint evaluation / accreditation (if necessary) accepted by all national QA agencies through a process of mutual agreement

Joint (voluntary) evaluation for the award of a Nordic quality label

Accreditation of individual parts of the programme in each country in accordance with national legislation, followed by joint audit of the QA of the programme as a whole.

The project group tested one of the alternatives, alternative A, which is the most far-reaching approach and would require significant agreements and legislative amendments in the Nordic countries. The main advantage of this approach is that it would require only one process and one decision for the evaluation of one programme. It would promote transparency in that stakeholders, including students, institutions and future employers would get an overall view of the quality of the programme as a whole. It would also increase mutual awareness of the QA systems in the Nordic countries. But as only one of these approaches was tested in pilot evaluations, the project group cannot promote any one of them on the basis of empirical findings.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION OF JOINT MASTER'S PROGRAMMES

The project group formulated the following criteria that might be included in a Nordic model for evaluation of joint programmes. The criteria were also used and tested in the two pilot evaluations of the project. With the exception of the criteria for jointness, the criteria were based on those for evaluation of master's programmes in the Nordic countries. Criteria were divided into six thematic areas:

1. AIMS OF THE PROGRAMME

Aims of the programme are clearly defined in terms of learning outcomes and in line with the EQF.

2. CRITERIA FOR JOINTNESS

There is a formal agreement between the participating institutions; mechanisms and responsibilities of cooperation spelled out and defined; support of managements; added value of programme; sustainable funding strategy; language policy; adequate resources (both infra and staff); mobility secured; students' rights secured also in other institutions; contacts between teachers across institutional/national boundaries; relevance and accessibility of information about programme to students and external stakeholders etc.

3. LINKS BETWEEN PROGRAMME CONTENTS, TEACHING AND CURRENT UP-TO-DATE RESEARCH

Programme and teaching are based on relevant, up-to-date, research-based knowledge; teaching and examination methods support students' attaining the goals of programme and contribute to students' ability, in national and international contexts, to account for and discuss results of research; teachers are active researchers and they possess pedagogical skills; there is an active and keen research environment which also provides PhD programmes and where students are involved etc.

4. RELEVANCE FOR FUTURE PROFESSIONAL CAREERS

There is labour market demand for graduates; programme makes graduates eligible for employment with high demands for independent work related to research and development or other qualified employments; regular contacts between programme and employers.

5. DEPTH AND PROGRESSION

Programme is planned and organised as a unit in which the courses contribute to the whole; programme relevant, up-to-date and realistic in relation to learning outcomes specified and length of programme; learning outcomes cover knowledge and abilities in the main area of study as well as generic skills; programme demonstrates progression

internally and in relation to relevant bachelor programmes and is based on students' expected prior knowledge (a first cycle degree); includes a main area of studies amounting to a minimum of 60 ECTS; the minimum extent of the thesis is 30 ECTS.

6. QUALITY ASSURANCE

Programme has a system which assures the quality of joint provision, and guarantees that the aims of programme are met; continuous information collection both for this purpose and for the further development of programme; QA practices involve students, staff and other stakeholders from all participating institutions; QA includes coordination of assessment across the whole programme; there is adequate provision for teachers' academic and pedagogical development; reports on results of QA activities are publicly available.

EXPERIENCES ON THE PILOT EVALUATIONS

Two pilot evaluations were implemented in 2008–2009. The programmes reviewed were the Nordic Master's Degree Programme in Gerontology (countries involved: Finland, Iceland and Sweden) and the Nordic Master's Degree Programme in Plant Pathology (countries involved: Denmark, Norway and Sweden). The main purposes of the pilot evaluations were to test and develop further the method and criteria created by the project group and to provide feedback to the two programmes with regard to the further development of the quality of their educational and QA activities. The pilot followed the general principles of the ESG: criteria were published and applied consistently; (subject) expert and student participation in the evaluation team; evaluation process included the use of self-evaluation, site visits and reports; it was ensured that the procedures used provided adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached.

In terms of testing a method and criteria for evaluation of joint programmes, the pilot evaluations functioned quite well. A framework had been developed although adjustments would have to be made regarding certain criteria. Higher education institutions' attitude towards the pilot evaluations were positive; pilots were seen as an opportunity for improvement and contributing to providing relevant feedback to the programmes. But even though the pilot evaluations may have been successful, several difficulties related to the legal situations, administrative issues and QA procedures remained to be solved.

The application of the criteria to the two pilot evaluations provided a full picture of the programmes. The criteria proved adequate in terms of focusing on a) programme content, current up-to-date research and administration – results correspond with those from national evaluations, and b) general challenges of running joint programmes. Most challenges of the two programmes were related to running a joint programme. There was a need for:

- clearly stated aims and learning outcomes, including a joint syllabus, language policy, as well as an account of the intended added value of the programme
- a common funding strategy (resources for planning and coordinating the programme; resources for mobility: staff, students, management)
- efficient study counselling and mobility plans, which take into account the needs of different kinds of students
- consideration of how to handle different semester periods
- a special attention in the social aspect and information-sharing between the students (e.g. a joint introductory course, a discussion area on the web)

- the definition of the distinct quality of graduates from joint programmes: accentuation of the specific skills and competences in the diploma; universities proposed to develop a system for keeping track of alumni in order to be able to get an overview of their careers and thus of the labour market available for graduates
- a joint QA system for the programme that takes the criteria proposed by the project group as its point of departure, and includes e.g. shared information on students from application to admission, joint procedures for monitoring students' progression through the programme through the use of individual study plans, midterm evaluations, and a plan for teacher exchanges within the programmes.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, any method of QA of joint master's programmes will have to take into account the ESG. It is also necessary to consider the different methodologies and criteria of the individual countries as well as the internal QA processes of the institutions. As stated above, the most important differences in the Nordic countries with regard to approach concern the object of evaluation, namely the focus on programme (Denmark, Sweden, and to some extent, Iceland) and on audits of institutional QA systems (Finland and Norway). On the other hand, there are countries with a strict legislation on accreditation such as Denmark and, partly Sweden, and countries with the principle of full self-accreditation for universities such as Finland, Norway, and, partly, Sweden. Therefore, when planning joint evaluations, the differences in methodology (between the Nordic countries) call for special arrangements and negotiations at different levels - ministries, QA agencies and higher education institutions all have to be involved in the process.

With certain exceptions, national authorities and even the central administration of higher education institutions had little awareness of the extent of international or Nordic collaboration in the form of joint provision of master's programmes. Thus, most of these programmes were not subject to external evaluation at national level. It is obvious that there is much to be done in the field of QA of joint programmes.

Finally, student perspective makes it particularly important to monitor and assess the quality of joint programmes. Students in joint programmes face a more complex situation than students studying in a national context; they must adapt to different environments and different learning situations.

CHAPTER 3:

JOINT PROGRAMMES AND MUTUAL RECOGNITION OF ACCREDITATION DECISIONS

Mark Frederiks, Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)

This contribution focuses on two projects regarding joint programmes carried out by the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA). Within the framework of the TEAM II project, ECA member agencies carried out five pilot accreditation procedures of joint programmes during autumn 2009 and spring 2010. Based on these experiences ECA has proposed a way forward regarding accreditation of joint programmes. This proposal has materialised in the JOQAR project which has started in October 2010 and will run until October 2013.

JOQAR involves the establishment of a European coordination point for external QA and accreditation of joint programmes. The coordination point will administer a publicly accessible knowledge base on joint programmes. A methodology for single accreditation procedures of joint programmes under guidance of the coordination point is being developed and this will be tested through four pilot procedures. In addition, a multilateral recognition agreement between agencies regarding the mutual acceptance of the results of accreditation of joint programmes has been developed and will be further enhanced and enlarged with new agencies.

Both the TEAM II and the JOQAR projects also focus on the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes. There are many recognition problems which have been discussed with ENIC-NARICs and for which guidelines to encourage good practices will be collectively developed. However, this contribution will only focus on the QA and accreditation aspects of joint programmes.

JOINT PROGRAMMES ON THE RISE

Joint programmes have been on the European political agenda, with ever increasing attention, for the last decade. They are thought to stimulate main aims of the Bologna agreements such as mobility of staff and students, cross-border cooperation and promotion of European higher education. According to the Bologna Stocktaking Report 2009⁸ there are now about 2,500 joint programmes in Europe of which over 150 are Erasmus Mundus programmes supported by the European Commission. These numbers show that there is an increasing interest from higher education institutions to cooperate on offering joint programmes.

With the increased attention on joint programmes, there is also an increased focus on finding purposeful methods for the external quality assurance of these programmes. Normally, QA and accreditation procedures are carried out by one QA agency and focusing on how institutions are offering programmes nationally. However, since joint programmes are, per definition, offered jointly by different higher education institutions it is necessary for agencies to make sure that the quality of the totality of the programme is up to standard. It is important to develop methods for evaluation or accreditation of joint programmes that do not involve unnecessary duplication, but rather focus on building

8 Rauhvargers A, Deane C and Pauwels W (2009), Bologna Process: Stocktaking Report.

mutual understanding and trust. As mutual recognition is a primary aim of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA)⁹ it was only natural that ECA became active in the field of joint programmes.

TEAM II

ECA has, as a reaction to the increase in the number of joint programmes offered in Europe and as a response to the calls for more focus on external quality assurance of these programmes, been exploring different ways in which accreditation procedures of joint programmes can be carried out.

In the period from October 2008 to September 2010, ECA partners were carrying out the EU funded project *Transparent European Accreditation decisions & Mutual recognition agreements II (TEAM II)*. The main aims of the project were: to develop a European methodology for accreditation of joint programmes; to explore recognition of qualifications awarded by joint programmes; and, to improve and extend the website Qrossroads¹⁰ which contains transparent information on quality assured higher education programmes.

In order to develop a European methodology for accreditation of joint programmes ECA member agencies coordinated five experimental single accreditation procedures of joint programmes during autumn 2009 and spring 2010. These would function as empirical material for discussions on how to carry out single accreditation procedures of joint programmes. After the completion of each of the procedures feedback from experts, coordinators of the joint programmes and representatives from the quality assurance agencies was gathered and analysed. A methodological report showing all the findings was published¹¹. All results of the TEAM II project were presented and discussed at a dissemination conference in June 2010 in Graz¹².

During autumn 2009 and spring 2010, ECA members coordinated the five pilot accreditation procedures. In total 24 higher education institutions¹³ from 12 different European countries and nine quality assurance agencies were involved in the procedures.

9 <http://www.eaconsortium.net>

10 <http://www.qrossroads.eu/>

11 Kaja Braathen, Mark Frederiks and Nick Harris (2010), How to assess and accredit joint programmes in Europe: Methodologies tested and proposed by the TEAM2 project.

12 Axel Aerden, Kaja Braathen and Mark Frederiks (Eds.; 2010), Joint programmes: Too many cooks in the kitchen? The Challenges for Accreditation, Recognition and Transparency of Joint Programmes – A Conference publication.

13 This only refers to the full partners of the participating joint programmes.

NAME OF THE PROGRAMME	FULL PARTNER INSTITUTIONS*	NEED FOR ACCREDITATION	COORDINATING QA AGENCY	OTHER QA AGENCIES INVOLVED	PLACE OF SITE VISIT
Research Master Geosciences of Basins and Lithosphere (BASINS)	VU University Amsterdam (NL) Uni Bergen (NO) Uni Rennes 1 (FR)	NL	NVAO	CTI, HAC	Amsterdam, NL
Joint European Master in Comparative Local Development (CoDe)	University of Trento (IT) Corvinus Uni (HU) Uni Ljubljana (SI) Uni Regensburg (DE)	DE, HU, SI	HAC	GAC, SQAA	Trento, IT
EM Master Journalism and Media within Globalisation (EMMA)	The University of Aarhus (DK) School of Journalism (DK) Uni Amsterdam (NL) Uni Hamburg (DE) Swansea Uni (UK) City Uni (UK)	DE, NL	ZEvA	NVAO	Hamburg, DE
Bachelor European Teacher Education for Primary Schools (ETEPS)	University College Zealand DK Stenden Uni (NL) Linneus Uni (SE) Buskerud UC (NO)	NL, SE, DK	NVAO	HSV	Leeuwarden, NL
Joint European Master in International Humanitarian Action (NOHA)	Deusto University (ES) Uni Cathol.de Louvain (BE), Uni Bochum (DE) UC Dublin (IE) Uni Groningen (NL) Uppsala Uni (SE) L'Université Paul Cézanne (FR)	ES, DE, NL	ANECA	AOAS, HSV, NVAO	Deusto, ES Louvain, BE

Table 1: Overview of the five pilot procedures

It was agreed that the procedures would be organised according to the following principles:

- One QA or accreditation organisation would be responsible for the procedure;
- The totality of the joint programme would be assessed in accordance with the ECA Principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes¹⁴;
- The accreditation frameworks of the respective accreditation organisations would be compared, and the differences taken into account;
- There would be a focus on learning outcomes.

Observers from QA and accreditation agencies of other countries involved in the programme could be included in the procedures.

In practice, all the procedures followed the normal steps of an accreditation procedure. On a more detailed level the procedures varied according to the institutions and agencies involved in the procedures.

In all the pilot procedures the scope of the self-evaluations was the totality of the joint programme. However, in some pilots the self-evaluations were written according to only

14 Available for downloading on: <http://www.eacaconsortium.net/main/documents/main-documents>

one set of criteria whilst in others the criteria of all the involved agencies were compared and assessed.

In most cases existing criteria functioned as the scope of assessment, while in one case a totally new set of criteria was developed.

The expert panels were mostly composed jointly by the involved QA agencies, although it varied according to how the organisation was in practice. In all the assessments, a discipline-specific expert, quality-assurance and international experts, as well as a student were included. Additionally, an expert from the professional field was included in most of the procedures.

The external assessment included in most cases only one site visit, but in one of the procedures there were two site visits.

The pilots also varied when it came to the actual accreditation decisions taken. In most of the cases, separate (coordinated) accreditation decisions were taken based on the same assessment. In one case a decision taken by one agency was recognised by another agency, and in another case the pilot was a true pilot procedure where no formal decisions were taken.

After the completion of each procedure, questionnaires were sent out to the coordinators of the joint programmes, the experts and the representatives from the quality assurance agencies. They were asked to share their experience with the various steps of the procedures, and to specify strengths and weaknesses. The feedback showed that the participants were generally content with the work of the joint expert panels, how the site visits were conducted and the outline of the final reports. Especially jointly composed expert panels were viewed as a valuable asset when assessing a joint programme.

Nonetheless, the feedback also showed that there are some areas which require special attention when carrying out single accreditation procedures of joint programmes.

Firstly, when more than one set of criteria was used, agreeing on the level of details and information required in the assessment was reported to be challenging. Variations in national regulations result in a situation where quality assurance agencies, to some extent, have to focus on different aspects of a study programme. This influences the interpretations of criteria and the focus of the assessment.

Secondly, in almost all the pilots, comments were made regarding the self evaluation reports. In most cases these reports were too descriptive, and with an imbalance of the information presented about each of the participating institutions and of the various criteria.

Thirdly, the composition of the expert panel can be challenging when QA agencies have different practice in this regard.

Finally, there were no unified ways in which the accreditation decisions could be taken. The decision making is affected by national regulations and needs to be taken into account when planning single accreditation procedures. The importance of making sure that the final report fulfils the requirements of all agencies involved in the procedure was emphasised as this will facilitate the decision making process.

In short, it is indeed possible to assess whether a joint programme meets the requirements of several quality assurance agencies through one single accreditation procedure. The challenge is rather to agree upon the essentials needed in such a procedure, and find ways within the national legal frameworks to carry out single accreditation procedures. As a consequence, ECA has started the JOQAR project to explore how these findings can be implemented into practice.

JOQAR

From October 2010 to October 2013, ECA partners in cooperation with other QA agencies (including two in India and Colombia) and ENIC-NARICs are carrying out the EU funded project *Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded (JOQAR)*¹⁵. The overall purpose of the project is to ensure that Erasmus Mundus programmes, and joint programmes in general, are facilitated in two specific areas: accreditation and recognition. With regard to accreditation, the project seeks to promote single accreditation procedures through:

- the development of a multilateral recognition agreement regarding QA and accreditation results, and
- the establishment of a European coordination point for external QA and accreditation of joint programmes.

One of the aims of ECA is to build up sufficient trust between the member agencies so that they can mutually recognise each other's accreditation decisions. So far only bilateral mutual recognition agreements between accreditation agencies have been signed. Since joint programmes have a wider scope and involve many different countries, a multilateral mutual recognition agreement specifically for joint programmes would be beneficial. If agencies have entered into a multilateral recognition agreement, it is a lot easier to facilitate that the results of a single accreditation procedure will be accepted in each of the countries that are part of the multilateral agreement. In December 2010 the first six agencies have signed such a multilateral agreement (the so called MULTRA¹⁶). Observation missions for another eight agencies are currently planned within the JOQAR project so that the MULTRA can be expanded with these agencies.

Another way forward is to establish a European coordination point for external QA and accreditation of joint programmes. The coordination point will give coordinators of joint programmes the opportunity to consult a specialised information centre when they need to undergo external quality assurance and/or accreditation of their joint programme. In 2011 a survey among coordinators of Erasmus Mundus joint masters programmes and QA agencies showed a clear need for such a coordination point¹⁷. A work plan to set up the coordination point is currently being developed. The coordination point will also administer a publicly accessible knowledge base which contains useful information for accreditation, external quality assurance and recognition of joint programmes. In addition, when a joint programme wants to go through a single accreditation procedure, the coordination point will bring agencies and the joint programme together and apply a methodology that enables a single procedure. This methodology is based on the TEAM II experiences and includes agreed common criteria and a limited set of specific national criteria which are needed to get the results of the single accreditation procedure accepted in all the countries of the joint programme. This "core+" assessment framework for joint programmes is in its final stage and will be subsequently tested in 2012 through four pilot single accreditation procedures of joint programmes.

CONCLUSIONS

There are still many problems hindering the further development and growth of joint programmes, both in the field of accreditation and recognition. Many challenges originate in differences between national systems and legislations. ECA as a consortium

¹⁵ More information about the JOQAR project is available on: <http://www.eaconsortium.net/main/projects/joqar>

¹⁶ See for an explanation of the MULTRA: <http://www.eaconsortium.net/main/documents/mutual-recognition-agreements>

¹⁷ Axel Aerden and Kaja Braathen (2011), Feasibility study: a coordination point for joint programmes.

The survey report can be downloaded from: <http://www.eaconsortium.net/main/documents/publications>

of national accreditation agencies striving for mutual recognition is in an excellent position to help joint programmes to overcome these problems.

The EU funded TEAM II and JOQAR projects show that a common approach is necessary and possible. This approach entails expanding mutual recognition agreements, developing a methodology for single accreditation procedures carried out by national agencies with the assistance of a European coordination point, and testing these in pilot procedures. It is supplemented by a knowledge base where institutions, agencies and stakeholders can find the necessary information on QA, accreditation and recognition of joint programmes.

Although practical problems facing joint programmes are manifold, the JOQAR project, which is now halfway, shows that pragmatic solutions are within reach.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EHEA

Joint degree programmes, resulting in a truly (trans-)European degree, facilitating mobility and attracting students from other EHEA countries or even from outside the European Higher Education Area, have been on top of the agenda from the beginning of the Bologna process. They have already been mentioned in the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), and the Ministers of Higher Education involved in the Bologna process raised the issue at most of the ministerial conferences since then. In 2007 and 2009, the implementation of joint programmes was also followed up in the stocktaking exercises. At the Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve conference in 2009, ministers emphasised that "joint degrees and programmes [...] shall become more common practice".

Already in the early days of joint programmes, it became clear that they challenge the existing national quality assurance procedures: more than one provider develop and offer a joint programme which is studied at more than one institution in more than one country with different political and legal frameworks and not the least differing quality assurance regimes.

The European 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 degree programmes and to develop approaches for this specific case.

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

In principle, part II of the ESG is applicable to accreditation of Joint degree programmes. However, national specificities in the application of the ESG, namely regarding the composition of expert panels, design of site visits, and the formal decision making constitute differences in the process design. HEI and quality assurance agencies developed approaches to joint accreditation procedures of the responsible agencies. Although joint accreditation procedures lower the burden on the HEI, they defy the accreditation agencies concerned because joint procedures must be designed for each case. An alternative would be the recognition of parts of the accreditation conducted by one responsible agency through another agency, which also challenge the agencies in terms of comparing procedural regulations and criteria. Hence, the ultimate aim is to reduce the accreditation of Joint degree programmes to a single procedure with effect in all national jurisdictions concerned.

A commonly accepted design of external quality assurance approaches to Joint degree programmes is not a difficult task. Although different approaches to quality assurance are in place (accreditation vs. evaluation vs. audits; programme level vs. institutional level), agencies demonstrated in the last years that these differences can be easily overcome, due to the alignment of existing national procedures with the ESG.

A more substantial hurdle for accrediting Joint degree programmes lies outside the remit of most of the quality assurance agencies in the EHEA, in national specifications for approval of degree programmes. There is clear evidence that national formal regulations which refer to the denomination of degrees, workload, semester periods, etc. are a much bigger obstacle for implementing Joint degree programmes than the accreditation or

external quality assurance as such. Hence, more flexibility regarding criteria for Joint degree programmes is paramount.

Based on experience, ENQA recommends to ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area to allow/authorise/enable 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. ENQA would welcome the opportunity to explore the practicalities in developing such an approach.

THE EUROPEAN ACCREDITATION APPROACH FOR JOINT PROGRAMMES SHOULD BE DESIGNED BASED ON THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES:

- Accreditation of Joint programmes should be based on a commonly accepted definition of a Joint programme. This definition should emphasise the 'jointness' as specific feature of such a programme.
- Deduced from that definition, a specific set of criteria for accrediting Joint programmes should be developed. This set would be based on the proper application of the Qualifications Framework of the EHEA, ECTS, DS and internal quality assurance in accordance with part I of the ESG. In addition, criteria regarding the specific nature of Joint programmes, namely joint responsibility, joint development and joint provision of the programme would be applied.
- Additional national criteria should only be applied if they are related to the quality of the programme. Formal national criteria as the most important obstacle to implementing Joint programmes should not be applied.
- The procedural regulations regarding the new approach should be based solely on part two of the ESG and guarantee especially the restriction to only one procedure with only one expert panel including international members and to only site visit.
- Agencies should apply these criteria and these regulations instead of national formal, but not quality related, specifications (in case accreditation is mandatory) which means that Joint programmes that have been accredited with the European approach would not need to be accredited for a second time at national level.

ANNEX I

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF JOINT PROGRAMMES

ENQA SEMINAR HOSTED BY ÖAR

19 September 2011, Vienna, Austria

VENUE

Alte Kapelle
Institut für Ethik und Recht
University of Vienna
Spitalgasse 2-4, Hof 2.8
1090 Vienna

PROGRAMME

9.00 **Welcome and Introduction**

Achim Hopbach, ENQA President

9.15 **Quality assurance of Joint programmes**

Chair: Alexander Kohler, AQA

**Transnational European Evaluation Project II (TEEP II),
Lessons learned**

Josep Grifoll, AQU, ENQA Board

10.15-10.45 Coffee break

**“Joint Master’s Programmes – Joint Evaluations: A Nordic Challenge”,
Lessons learned**

Kirsi Hiltunen, FINHEEC

12.00 Lunch Break

13.30 **Joint programmes and mutual recognition of accreditation
decisions**

Mark Frederiks, ECA

Chair: Elisabeth Fiorioli, ÖAR, ENQA Board

14.30-15.00 Coffee Break

15.00 **Final Discussion: Recommendations**

16.00 **Conclusions**

Elisabeth Fiorioli, ÖAR, ENQA Board



THIS REPORT is based on the ENQA seminar on Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes that was held on 19 September 2011 in Vienna, Austria. The purpose of this seminar was to analyse the experience already gained in quality assurance of joint programmes as regards specific issues and methodological approaches, and to make recommendations to the ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area.



WORKSHOP REPORT 19

ISBN 978-952-5539-65-3 (Paperbound)

ISBN 978-952-5539-64-6 (PDF)

ISSN 1458-106X