GUIDE TO THE ACCREDITATION OF JOINT PROGRAMMES USING THE EUROPEAN APPROACH

This document outlines the standards for quality assurance of joint programmes following the framework of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. Its aim is to guide the leaders of joint programmes through the internal self-assessment process and support the panels in assessing whether the standards have been met.

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INTRODUCTION

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes was adopted by European ministers responsible for higher education in May 2015 and was developed to facilitate external quality assurance of these programmes.[1] It is worth noting the European Commission's (EC) publication of the proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education,[2] which applies fundamentally to joint degrees. The EC recommends that Member States focus on five areas related to quality assurance and recognition of joint degrees between European institutions:

1. Improving all quality assurance systems.
2. Developing an inter-institutional quality assurance approach for higher education institution alliances.
3. Streamlining programme or combined (institutional and programme) accreditation approaches.
4. Building the foundations for a European degree.
5. Implementing automatic recognition.

The European Approach defines standards that are based on the agreed tools of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), without the need to apply additional national criteria. This is expected to facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes, which truly reflect and mirror their joint character.

The European Approach considers the distinctive features of a joint programme and specifies the" standard" approach accordingly.

> **Joint programmes** are understood as integrated curricula coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from countries in the EHEA (and possibly also non-EHEA countries), leading to either double/multiple degrees or a joint degree.

> **Double/multiple degrees** are separate degrees awarded by the higher education institutions offering the joint programme, certifying the successful completion of the programme.

> **A joint degree** is a single document awarded by the higher education institutions

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[1] European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

[2] Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education. COM/2024/147 final

offering the joint programme and nationally acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme.

The European Approach relates only to joint programmes offered jointly by higher education institutions from two or more countries and it does not address the quality assurance of programmes delivered jointly by different institutions from a single country.

The European Approach is the appropriate instrument to be applied whenever Catalan universities cooperate with other European higher education institutions (HEIs) for joint programmes and when programme accreditation (*ex-ante* or *ex-post*) is required to be recognised in Spain[3] (according to additional provisions 6 and 7 of Royal Decree 822/2021) and by other European authorities and quality assurance agencies.

It is important to note that both new and existing joint programmes can be assessed using this guide. The specific considerations for each case are as follows:

> **New joint programmes**: this guide serves as a basis for *ex-ante* accreditation of the anticipated quality of a new programme. It focuses on the expected achievements of the proposed programme. The assessment principle is thus interpreted as referring to potential quality and its achievable outcomes.

> **Existing joint programmes**: this guide serves as a basis for an *ex-post* accreditation of the actual achievements and performance of a joint programme already being delivered. The assessment principle is thus interpreted as referring to current quality and its achieved outcomes.

Reference framework and regulations

Below are the main points of reference considered when drawing up this guide:

> **European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes[4]**

Adopted by European Ministers responsible for higher education, it has been developed to facilitate external quality assurance of such programmes. It defines standards that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria. This is expected to facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes, which truly reflect and mirror their joint character.

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[3] Royal Decree 822/2021, of 28 September, establishing the organisation of university degree programmes and the quality assurance process thereof.

[4] European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

> **Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education[5]**

On 27 March 2024, the EC published the annual package on the development of the European Strategy for Universities. The purpose of this proposal is to ensure that quality assurance and recognition systems in higher education support transparency, mobility and transnational cooperation, while maintaining high standards and mutual trust.

> **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)[6]**

This is a key reference document for quality assurance institutions and agencies, providing guidance for the design, implementation and review of both internal and external quality assurance systems in higher education.

> **Spanish regulation**

The guide fulfils the requirements of Royal Decree 822/2021 of 28 September, establishing the organisation of university education programmes and the quality assurance process thereof. Said decree redefined the organisation and structure of official university education in Spain.

Structure of the guide

This guide is structured into nine sections, each corresponding to a standard for the quality assurance of joint programmes adopted by the European Higher Education Ministers in 2015:

1. Eligibility
2. Learning outcomes
3. Study programme
4. Admission and recognition
5. Learning, teaching and assessment
6. Student support
7. Resources
8. Transparency and documentation
9. Quality assurance

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[5] European Commission. Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education. Brussels, 27.3.2024 COM(2024) 147 final.

[6] Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Brussels: ENQA, 2015.

1. ELIGIBILITY

1.1 Status

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

In the international context of assessment and of the assessment panel, understanding which institutions qualify as higher education institutions or are eligible to award a certain degree cannot be taken for granted. Consequently, as part of the procedure it must be confirmed that all participating institutions are officially recognised as higher education institutions within their respective national contexts. The required documentation will vary from country to country.

The institutions awarding the degree(s) must ensure that the degree(s) are officially part of the higher education degree systems of the respective countries.

The institutions should submit supporting documents confirming the legal status of each partner. It is recommended that this documentation be included as an annex in the self-evaluation report.

Annex 1 ("Status" section) includes additional information.

1.2 Joint design and delivery

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

The process of programme design should be clearly explained, along with the extent to which the partners were involved. Existing cases have shown that different partners may be involved at different levels, at different times or to different extents. It should be evident that the design of the programme constituted a collaborative, jointly managed effort. Following this joint design, the European Approach explicitly expects the programme to also be jointly delivered, although it does not prescribe a specific model for joint delivery, as different contexts may require different approaches. However, the requirement for a jointly

designed and delivered programme is crucial. For instance, some programmes may include mobility and even lead to the awarding of more than one degree, yet they may not meet the criteria for a joint programme as defined here.

Annex 1 (Joint degree) includes additional information.

1.3 Cooperation agreement

The terms and conditions of the joint programme are laid down in a cooperation agreement.

The cooperation agreement should explicitly show that the joint programme has well-defined terms and conditions, and these must be formally laid down in said document. The agreement should be available for review by the panel with a definitive version being officially signed. It is recommended that this document be included as an annex in the self-assessment report.

The agreement should include details of:

> 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.

Evidence

> Self-assessment report.

> Signed cooperation agreement.

> Programme regulations.

> The institutions should submit supporting documents confirming each partner's legal authority with regard to:

> > Participation in the joint programme.

> > (Joint) degree awarding rights (if applicable).

Assessment

> Coherence between the programme's name and its aims, objectives, content, field of knowledge and academic level.

> Recognition of the institutions participating in the joint programme as official HEIs in their respective countries.

> Completeness of the cooperation agreement and its alignment with the educational level and characteristics of the joint programme proposal.

> Compliance with academic regulations, where applicable.

2. LEARNING OUTCOMES

2.1 Level [ESG 1.2]

The intended learning outcomes are aligned with the corresponding level in the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)[7] and the applicable national qualifications framework(s).

One of the most distinctive features of a joint programme is the fact that it is both designed and delivered by multiple partner higher education institutions across different countries. Each degree-awarding partner must ensure that the joint programme fits within its national degree system. Since a joint programme should lead to the award of multiple degrees or a joint degree, its intended learning outcomes must therefore be aligned with the respective national higher education qualifications framework of each awarding degree partner. Each national qualifications framework within the European Union is officially referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The QF-EHEA's respective cycle descriptors are considered compatible with the descriptors for levels 6 to 8 of the EQF.[8]

The institutions should provide evidence of this alignment and correspondence, including:

a) A matrix aligning the intended learning outcomes with the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

b) A matrix aligning the intended learning outcomes with the applicable national qualifications framework.

It is recommended that this document be included as an annex in the self-assessment report.

2.2 Disciplinary field

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

Intended learning outcomes serve as the starting and reference point for all further stages of a joint programme's design, implementation and quality assurance. They also determine

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[7] Appendix III: Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (revised 2018). Paris Communiqué.

[8] Explaining the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (2008).

the teaching and learning strategy, the assessment methods and the support measures needed to ensure their achievement. Therefore, they must be carefully designed and formulated, as they represent a commitment to prospective students of the joint programme.

Moreover, in quality assurance procedures based on the European Approach, intended learning outcomes play an even more significant role. They constitute the first key stage in the joint programme's design where the joint character can be emphasised. Through the programme's unique set of learning aims, objectives and learning outcomes, the consortium can articulate the added value afforded by the programme's joint delivery. This synergy should create learning opportunities that would be difficult to achieve within a single higher education institution.

The intended learning outcomes should be formulated in a way that enables the assessment and verification of their achievement during the programme. It is also important to limit the overall number of learning outcomes in order to ensure their full implementation within the courses of the programme. Finally, the set of intended learning outcomes for the joint programme must be a joint decision of the consortium, as outlined in substandard 1.2 above.

2.3 Achievement [ESG 1.2]

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

This standard directly builds on the rationale for the appropriate design of a joint programme's intended learning outcomes, as indicated previously. A reliable demonstration of the achievement of the intended learning outcomes is one of the key indicators of programme quality. This demonstrates that the rationale for the adopted curriculum and the teaching and learning strategy are appropriate.

The achievement of the intended learning outcomes should be verified at each stage[9] of the delivery of the programme. Sufficient evidence for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes must be provided both for the individual subjects units and for the programme as a whole. This evidence may also be used for the purposes of both internal and external quality assurance.

The most common types of evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes

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[9] Stages are structured as modules, subjects or other key components that serve as capstones to demonstrate the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

include:

> Diploma thesis

> Exams

> Student projects, essays, etc.

However, certain intended learning outcomes are more difficult to demonstrate than subject-specific ones. Usually, these are related to skills, responsibility and autonomy. In view of the specific features and learning opportunities of joint programmes, learning outcomes relating to the international and intercultural context might be particularly expected.

The following documentation may provide useful guidance:

Reference documents

Focus 1: Degree programme profiles. Learning objectives, graduation profiles and learning outcomes
Focus 2: Assessment of learning outcomes
Assessment and Demonstration of Achieved Learning Outcomes: Recommendations and Good Practices
An introduction to international and intercultural learning outcomes

2.4 Regulated professions

The joint programme takes into account the legal requirements established by the regulated profession.

If relevant for the specific joint programme, the minimum agreed training conditions specified in European Union Directive 2005/36/EC,[10] or other relevant common training frameworks established under the Directive should be considered.

> This criterion is taken into consideration whenever a joint programme aims to award degrees in professional fields classified as regulated professions, i.e.:

> Medical professions (e.g., doctor of medicine, nurses, etc.)

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[10] Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications (Text with EEA relevance).

> Dental practitioners

> Veterinary surgeons

> Pharmacists

> Architects

> Naval and maritime-related professions

> Technical professions (e.g., vehicle diagnostics)

> Other regulated fields

In such cases, the requirements indicated in Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications should be included in the programme's design and delivery.

Evidence

> Matrix aligning intended learning outcomes with the applicable national qualifications framework.

> Diploma thesis.

> Exams.

> Student projects, essays and similar coursework.

> Final-year project guidelines.

Assessment

> Alignment between the structure and content of subjects, and the discipline, and the academic level of the degree.

> Consistency with expected learning outcomes.

3. STUDY PROGRAMMES [ESG 1.2][11]

3.1 Curriculum

The structure and content of the curriculum are designed to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

The intended learning outcomes, along with the programme's aims and objectives, are the main points of reference for the structure and content of the curriculum. This link applies to every study programme. However, for joint programmes there are two specific aspects that need to be taken into consideration:

> The curriculum needs to emphasise the joint character of the programme. The structure and content of the curriculum should create synergy among the contributions from consortium partners. This means that the core value of the programme lies in its joint design and delivery. By integrating the knowledge and resources of all consortium partners, the programme should provide students with learning opportunities that would be difficult to achieve within a single higher education institution.

> The joint character of the programme should enable partners to be innovative in their approach to structuring the academic content, going beyond what a single partner could deliver alone. International and intercultural skills and competences are examples of the benefits of the synergy that can be achieved in the learning environment provided by a joint programme. The structure of the curriculum should enable students to effectively acquire these skills.

> Each partner should have a clearly defined and unique role in and contribution to the curriculum. This means that the design of the curriculum content should focus on bringing together distinct expertise and input to enhance the study programme. This could include unique research interests, educational opportunities, learning environment, facilities, etc.

Each partner's responsibilities within the curriculum must be clearly identified.

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[11] Standards 2 and 3 of the European Approach should be read and interpreted together with Standard 1.2 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. However, there are several additional aspects of quality assurance unique to joint programmes.

3.2 Credits

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

The ECTS system is widely known and commonly used across the European Higher Education Area. However, there are some differences across countries and among higher education institutions' policies regarding its practical implementation; therefore, this is yet another specific factor that should be taken into consideration in managing the quality of a joint programme. Identifying different approaches to ECTS application among partners is particularly important in the early stages of design of a joint programme. This must be completed before approaching *ex ante* accreditation as it impacts the structure of the curriculum and the distribution of content among its modules.

Some higher education institutions assign a fixed number of ECTS credits per module. In these cases, every module has a constant ECTS value, meaning that the structure of the curriculum, the content of the modules and their distribution among academic periods (e.g. semesters) is determined accordingly.

Other institutions adopt the opposite approach. First, the overarching learning rationale and content of the modules are designed and distributed within the curriculum. Only after this stage is complete do they estimate the workload needed to achieve the intended learning outcomes within the modules, whereupon ECTS points are allocated accordingly. There is no preferred approach to this aspect of the study programme. However, it is crucial for partners to outline their policies in this regard and reach a consensus on common management of ECTS credit distribution and allocation.

3.3 Workload

The programme's workload and average completion time are monitored and are sufficient to meet the intended learning outcomes requirements.

A joint bachelor's programme will typically entail a total student workload of 180-240 ECTS. A joint master's programme will typically involve 90-120 ECTS and must not have fewer than 60 ECTS at the second-cycle level (credit ranges according to the QF-EHEA).[12] Joint doctoral programmes have no specified credit range. The workload and the average completion time should be monitored.

The workload required to achieve the programme's intended learning outcomes and earn a

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[12] More information can be found here.

degree is strictly regulated by national legal frameworks. However, joint programme consortia should be aware that significant differences may exist among national degree structures regarding ECTS credits. For example, in most EHEA countries, a master's programme must incorporate a minimum of 90 ECTS. However, in some countries, a master's degree is awarded on completion of only 60 ECTS. The programme consortium need to address these differences with particular relevance for the purposes of *ex-ante* accreditation or for the future recognition of an ex-post accreditation decision based on the European Approach. Some EHEA countries may not recognise a joint programme for accreditation if it does not meet their national workload requirements.

Evidence

> Higher education institutions' internal regulations.

> Description of each partner's role in and contribution to the curriculum.

> Joint character of the program: joint modules, collaborative teaching methods, joint seminars, exchange opportunities, etc.

> Student workload distribution in ECTS.

Assessment

> Consistency with expected learning outcomes.

> Adequacy of the curriculum structure to deliver all planned teaching and learning activities.

> Relevance of the final-year project and work placement proposals.

4. ADMISSION AND RECOGNITION [ESG 1.4][13]

4.1 Admission

The process for the admission of students to the degree is fair, reliable, equitable and publicly accessible. The admission requirements and selection procedures should be appropriate considering the programme's level and discipline.

ESG 1.4 "Student admission, progression, recognition and certification" states that "Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition, and certification". Moreover, the guidelines further highlight the idea that "It is vital to have fit-for-purpose admission, recognition, and completion procedures, particularly when students are mobile within and across higher education systems. It is important that access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner".

Student admission is a process that includes several steps. One of the first questions that consortium partners should address is whether student admission will be organised jointly or separately. Regardless of the approach adopted, the general recommendation would be to set up a joint policy for student admission covering all the steps of the process. This could include adopting a common selection procedure and setting up a joint selection committee with harmonised selection procedures, including a joint recruitment policy. It is advisable for the selection process to involve academic and administration staff from each partner institution.

One starting point would be to establish admission requirements. Although joint programmes often have joint selection committees, it should be noted that admission requirements need to comply with national and institutional regulations unless specific exceptions apply to joint programmes. It is advisable to follow the national admission requirements established in law by the strictest partner in order to guarantee recognition of

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[13] The standard on admission and recognition is closely related to ESG 1.4 "Student admission, progression, recognition and certification" (ESG 2015); therefore, these two standards should be considered together to better understand what they imply. In addition, as most of the terms and conditions of the joint programme must be laid down in a cooperation agreement, this standard is also closely linked to substandard 1.3 "Cooperation agreement" of the European Approach in which the admission and selection procedures for students and the recognition of credits should be described.

the awarded degrees and to avoid conflicts with national or institutional criteria.

Recruitment is another important step in the admission process. In some cases, all relevant programme information (admission criteria, application process and selection criteria, etc.) is gathered on a joint webpage. This can help centralising and unifying admissions information and encourage applications thanks to transparency and consistency in the information provided. Using a centralised student application process can help prevent inequalities in admission. However, regardless of whether the student application process is centralised or decentralised, it is important that all partners have access to application information. Student selection requires the involvement of all partner institutions, and it is essential for all roles and responsibilities in the selection procedure to be clearly defined and assigned. Typically, partners conduct a pre-selection process, with the final decision referred to a joint selection committee.

4.2 Recognition

The mechanisms available in the study programme allow for credit transfer and prior learning 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.

In terms of recognition, the standard stipulates that "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". At the same time, ESG 1.4 "Student admission, progression, recognition and certification" determines that "Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility. Appropriate recognition procedures rely on institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention; Cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country".

It must be considered that one of the fundamental principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) is that "foreign qualifications shall be recognised unless there is a substantial difference between the foreign qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification of the host country". Accordingly, recognition should be granted unless there is a substantial difference. In addition, according to the LRC, recognition procedures and criteria should be transparent, coherent, reliable and allow the right to appeal. The LRC further indicates that recognition decisions should be based on appropriate information.

In this respect, the Linking Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance (LIREQA) project was developed with the main aim of contributing to fair recognition of qualifications by developing recommendations to associate academic recognition with both internal and external quality assurance processes. One of the outcomes of the project was the establishment of recommendations for HEIs, quality assurance agencies, ENIC/NARIC centres and stakeholders.

Annex 1 ("Recognition" section) includes additional information.

Evidence

> Regulations or general procedures for student admission.

> Criteria and procedures for admission.

> Criteria for credit recognition.

> Procedures and regulations for student and teacher mobility.

Assessment

> Adequacy, suitability and clarity of admission criteria.

> Compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and legal regulations.

> Relevance of the mechanisms and criteria for the recognition of prior learning and credit transfer.

> Adequacy of mechanisms for student and teacher mobility.

5. LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT [ESG 1.3][14]

5.1 Learning and teaching

The programme is designed to correspond with the intended learning outcomes, and the learning and teaching approaches applied are adequate to achieve those. The diversity of students and their needs are respected and addressed, especially in view of potential diverse cultural backgrounds of the students.

This standard aims to ensure constructive alignment between learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities, and assessment procedures within the programme. While each programme is unique, a common approach to design helps make sure that this standard is met:

> The programme's learning and teaching approaches should enable to achieve key learning goals.

> The curriculum, along with its learning and teaching methods should aim to enable students to achieve the programme's intended learning outcomes.

> Course manuals should outline the overall objectives, context and subject matters of the course, including the intended learning outcomes. These manuals should be made available to students.

> Each higher education institution participating in the joint programme should be able to demonstrate that the programme's educational goals are being met.

> The programme consortium should regularly evaluate and, where necessary, adjust the pedagogical methods and modes of delivery.

Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment also means that the programme consortium must demonstrate how they accommodate the diversity and varied needs of students. The diversity of students must be considered not only from the standpoint of

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[14] The European Approach distinguishes between two related requirements: learning and teaching methods to achieve the intended learning outcomes; and consistent application of the assessment regulations. Both requirements are based on ESG 1.3 "Student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment". For joint study programmes with students and teachers from different countries, the European Approach focuses on this standard taking into consideration the diverse cultural backgrounds of students and applying the assessment regulations consistently.

different linguistic or cultural backgrounds, but also based on diverse disciplines and academic traditions. All joint programmes should make special efforts to design and organise the first semester (e.g., by implementing introductory weeks). The first semester in a joint programme not only aims to address disparities in knowledge and build the necessary competences for subsequent modules in later semesters, but also seeks to promote social interaction among students.

5.2 Assessment of students

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

This part of Standard 5 aims to ensure that the assessment of achieved learning outcomes follows the principle of constructive alignment and is consistently and fairly applied to all students across all partner institutions, in accordance with the established procedure. In international joint programmes, transparency in grading (and grade differences) is crucial due to variance in assessment and grading cultures. In order to assure compliance with this standard, the joint programme could consider the following:

> Assessment methods used should correspond with the learning tasks.

> Examination regulations and grading criteria should be published and easily accessible.

> Examinations passed at one consortium partner institution as part of the joint programme should be fully and automatically recognised by the remaining partners.

> Different national and/or institutional grading systems should be harmonised and a system for conversion of grades should be in place.

> The joint programme must ensure transparency, fairness, consistency and equity in assessment procedures.

> Specific provisions should be implemented to ensure assistance is available for students with care responsibilities or special support needs.

> The consortium should have a transparent procedure in place to handle student complaints about grading or other issues regarding the assessment process.

Unlike dual degree programmes, joint programmes require joint admission and examination regulations to address and reconcile national, institutional and linguistic differences in these areas; therefore, joint regulations are an important task within the programme development process.

The goal is not a complete standardisation of learning and grading cultures, but rather to ensure transparency and reliability to the broadest extent possible. There are a number of ways to achieve this. One example could be regular exchanges between consortium partners on criteria and standards, as well as regular joint grading sessions. Joint programmes also typically conduct a joint examination of the final thesis, which is another effective method of ensuring the aforementioned goal is met.

Implementing both a grade conversion table and grading grid (for all coursework and the final thesis) provides teachers with a tool to compare their standards and criteria. Also, teachers may submit their grades according to local standards and, for the purposes of the student's academic record, these may be converted easily using the grade conversion table. Some HEIs have developed a common online gradebook to upload and download marks, enabling local coordinators to follow each student's progress remotely.

Evidence

> Course syllabi.

> Course teaching guides (which must contain learning outcomes, assessment systems and criteria, teaching methodology and activities, and learning resources).

> Examination regulations and grading criteria.

> Guidelines for master's degree final-year projects.

> Evaluation forms.

> Examples of degree final projects.

Assessment

> Joint transcripts of records and joint diploma supplements are being used.

> General examination regulations are clearly described, with specific assessment methods further explained.

> There is evidence of shared assessment standards across partner universities to ensure reliability for students.

> There are regular exchanges among partners about criteria and standards, with regular joint grading procedures in place (e.g., joint examination of the thesis).

> A range of assessment methods are employed that are aligned with different learning tasks.

> There is evidence of constructive alignment between learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities, and assessment procedures.

> Grade conversion tables and grading grids are used.

> HEIs have established a formal procedure for student appeals

6. STUDENT SUPPORT [ESG 1.6]

The student support services contribute to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. They consider specific challenges of mobile students.

This standard is directly related to ESG 1.6 "Learning resources and student support". However, the specific operational structure of joint programmes requires special attention to the particular needs of their students. Support provided by the consortium offering the joint programme should include measures that accommodate the international mobility of students throughout the programme. These may include the following aspects of student mobility:

Pre-arrival

This phase shall cover all services provided to students before they arrive at the HEI to begin the joint programme. This applies to both first-year students and those spending a semester at another consortium university. Services offered to incoming students may include:

> Designating a local tutor (a student or faculty member) to facilitate the transition and adaptation.

> Creating communication channels between new and current students, or alumni, to exchange experiences and share advice (one effective means of doing this could be through social media platforms, suited to the countries and locations involved).

> Producing and sharing student guides containing essential information for newcomers, such as contact details, maps, administrative formalities, terms and conditions, and insurance information.

> Providing information on immigration and visa procedures to incoming students, including guides, websites with procedural details and contact information for immigration offices, as well as information on travel preparation, arrival and residence requirements in the host country.

> Creating and distributing a student handbook. It should contain important information on the joint programme and its structure; mobility options for later semesters; joint standards and requirements for internships, placements, theses and the degree; information about student life, facilities, the joint programme directors and administrative staff.

> Providing information on language courses offered by all partner universities.

Upon arrival

Services offered to incoming students may include:

> Airport reception, provided either by the tutor, senior students or other parties, such as professional taxi services.

> A comprehensive guide to daily life from their tutors (including transport options, communication tools, etc.).

> Participation in orientation/welcome days, organised for all new incoming students or specifically for joint programme students.

> Administrative support to clarify the formal requirements of the programme.

> Meetings with the joint programme teaching staff to introduce students to the programme, ECTS credit requirements, the agenda for the semester, the academic calendar, as well as final thesis requirements.

> Emergency and administrative contact details for programme coordinators and administrative staff to assist with any programme-related inquiries or urgent matters.

Other support services

The self-assessment report should consider the provision of additional services, such as equity policies, insurance procedures and services, accommodation, visa procedures, as well as other support services that contribute to integration, cultural diversity and equal opportunities.

Additional information is available in the "Other Support Services" section of Annex 1.

Evidence

> List or links to student support and guidance services.

> Tutorial action plan(s) (TAP).

> Agreements with external institutions for work placements.

Assessment

> Adequacy of support and guidance measures for students.

7. RESOURCES [ESG 1.5 & 1.6]

7.1 Staff

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

Delivering a joint programme across different institutions leads to a diverse staff portfolio that should be documented as part of the self-assessment report. This should include an overview of the relevant teaching staff from all involved institutions, along with details of staff resources allocated to coordination activities where applicable to implementation of the study programme. An annex or link should provide brief academic CVs of all staff members involved from the different institutions to allow the review panel to assess the qualifications and international and professional experience of all participating staff. While different institutions may use different formats, the consortium should determine the best way to present the relevant information together.

7.2 Facilities

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

One of the challenges within the procedure is the review of facilities, as the panel usually only visits one institution, while the programme is implemented at multiple locations. Consequently, the documentation of facilities requires specific attention as it should cover relevant facilities at all different locations. This substandard is of particular importance when the programme uses laboratories or technical equipment in order to achieve the learning outcomes. The self-assessment report should provide enough evidence to give experts a quantitative understanding of the available facilities. Additionally, site visits should include a presentation of the facilities available at the institution hosting the visit and those available at all partner institutions. Useful tools may include video tours, virtual tours or photographic documentation. Interviews with students can also provide an understanding of the adequacy of facilities based on their experiences. Accordingly, this approach may be used by engaging with students who have personal experience with all the participating institutions, if applicable.

Evidence

> List of educational facilities and infrastructure.

> Link to teaching staff curriculum vitae.

> Consortium agreement on academic and teaching support staff.

Assessment

> Adequacy of academic facilities and services in relation to the educational objectives of the degree.

> Sufficiency of academic facilities and services for the provision of teaching and learning activities.

8. TRANSPARENCY AND DOCUMENTATION [ESG 1.8]

Relevant information about the programme, like admission requirements and procedures, course catalogue, examination and assessment procedures, etc. is well documented and published considering specific needs of mobile students.

The joint programme consortium should draw up and publish relevant documents for different purposes and various stakeholders. In order to assure the transparency of the programme, its policies and its procedures, access to as many official supporting documents as possible should be open and free. Furthermore, the consortium should take into account the international nature of the programme. In this respect, it is crucial to match the language of the documentation with the language of instruction used in the programme.

Admission requirements

This section covers all procedures and requirements relating to admission and recruitment. It is important for the admission procedure to be standardised across the whole consortium.

Curriculum, course catalogue and syllabi

The course catalogue allows students to explore the individual courses which make up their degree programme. Information on the curriculum, the list of mandatory and elective courses, and the number of ECTS required to complete the programme should be available on the joint programme website.

The programme consortium should also ensure that the syllabi for each course are available. It is important to guarantee transparency and consistency in syllabus formatting so the content is set out in a uniform manner, regardless of the institution delivering the module. The syllabi should be easily available to both students and teachers across the programme consortium. Furthermore, making the curriculum and course syllabi publicly available would greatly enhance the transparency of the programme.

Examination and assessment procedures

As with the other areas mentioned, examination and assessment procedures shall also be well documented and published, while addressing the specific needs associated with student mobility. This means that this information should be available to all current programme students, regardless of their study location.

Additional information can be found in the "Transparency and documentation" section of Annex 1.

Evidence

> Link to the public webpage of the study programme, if already published.

Assessment

> The consortium publishes accurate, complete, up-to-date and easily accessible information about the characteristics of the joint programme and its operational development.

9. QUALITY ASSURANCE [ESG 1.1 TO 1.10]

The activity of the joint programme is integrated into the consortium's quality assurance system. The IQAS collects information for the analysis and improvement of the joint programme and has procedures that ensure that the joint programme is reviewed and improved periodically.

The cooperating institutions should implement joint internal quality assurance processes in accordance with Part 1 of the ESG. According to Part 1 of the ESG, internal quality assurance encompasses ten standards that joint programmes must address together:

> ESG 1.1 Policy for quality assurance

> ESG 1.2 Design and approval of their programmes.

> ESG 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

> ESG 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

> ESG 1.5 Teaching staff

> ESG 1.6 Learning resources and student support

> ESG 1.7 Information management

> ESG 1.8 Public information

> ESG 1.9 Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes

> ESG 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

This standard is closely linked to ESG 1.9 "Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned."

The foundation for jointly managing internal quality assurance is for all partners in the programme to develop and agree upon a quality policy and quality assurance mechanisms. Since the Consortium Agreement serves as a key instrument for ensuring solid partnerships, it is strongly advisable for it to include provisions on the programme's quality policy and all the necessary internal quality assurance measures.

Another important issue is the collection, analysis and use of relevant information for the effective management of the programme and other activities (ESG 1.7). Without reliable data, quality enhancement in joint programmes is not possible. Reliable data is crucial for informed decision-making, and for identifying both strengths and areas that require attention. To this end, joint programmes need to establish procedures and instruments for

reviewing and assessing the degree programme in terms of the curriculum, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of courses, modules and teaching units, while also addressing areas such as mobility, labour market integration and overall satisfaction. Some key quality indicators for consideration and analysis, as mentioned in ESG 1.7, include:

> Key performance indicators.

> Profile of the student population.

> Student progression, success and drop-out rates.

> Student satisfaction with their programmes.

> Availability of learning resources and student support.

> Career paths of graduates.

The Consortium should demonstrate that the data compiled is actively used for review and continuous improvement, leading to well-defined improvement plans.

Evidence

> Link to the detailed quality assurance system and improvement plans.

> Monitoring reports.

> Dashboard or similar data representation.

> IQAS review reports, if applicable.

Assessment

> Relevance of the procedures described to ensure the assessment and continuous improvement of the joint programme.

ANNEX 1. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

To further clarify and expand on certain standards, this annex provides additional information and includes examples, best practices and conclusions from the ImpEA project.

1.1. Status

It might seem unusual, but in the international context of the assessment as well as the assessment panel, determining which institutions qualify as HEIs or as being eligible to award certain degrees is not always straightforward. Consequently, as part of the procedure it must be confirmed that all participating institutions are recognised as higher education institutions in their respective contexts.

The required documentation differs from country to country. Examples include higher education laws, royal decrees and ministerial confirmation letters. In some countries, participation in joint degrees may not fall under the standard framework, or the awarded degree might not be part of the usual available degrees in a country. Consequently, evidence regarding the status of all institutions and their ability to take part in joint degrees must be included in the self-assessment report. Experience shows that close cooperation between the coordinating institution and the coordinating agency is vital to make sure that the relevant information is provided in each individual case. Since review panels typically do not possess in-depth legal knowledge of all higher education systems that are part of the consortium, the issue of status and degree-awarding capacity should be addressed at an early stage between the coordinating agency and the consortium.

1.2 Joint degree

When considering this substandard, it is important to explain how the programme was designed and the extent to which the different partners were involved in this process. Existing cases have shown that different partners might be involved at different levels, different times and to varying degrees. However, it should be clear that the design of the programme was a joint activity from the outset. Beyond joint programme design, the European Approach clearly expects delivery of the programme to be a joint effort also. As a result, the following aspects must be considered: How are the different partners involved in the practical implementation of the academic programme? Is the curriculum offered by different institutions within the consortium? Are there different mobility pathways among institutions? Does the joint delivery include shared teaching, mobility and joint virtual/digital learning opportunities? The European Approach does not prescribe a specific type of joint

delivery, as the diversity of joint programme contributions usually leads to involves a variety of approaches. However, ensuring joint delivery is essential to distinguish genuine joint programmes from those which, while offering well-integrated mobility leading sometimes to the award of more than one degree, are not eligible as joint programmes in the sense of the European Approach.

4.2. Recognition

The specific recommendations for HEIs focus on two key areas: the tools to be used in recognition procedures – including the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary texts, the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR-HEI Manual), and other resources developed by the ENIC/NARIC networks – and the need for regular monitoring and review of recognition procedures as part of the institution's internal quality assurance system.

For all types of recognition, it is important that clear and easily accessible information is available to students, ensuring they are promptly informed throughout the recognition process.

Appropriate institutional infrastructure is vital to ensure and support reliable, consistent recognition decision-making.

It is important to enhance cooperation with national ENIC/NARIC centres (for information and capacity building) and engage with other HEIs (sharing information, knowledge and best practices) when it comes to recognition.

6. Other support services

Insurance

All students enrolled in the joint programme shall receive international insurance that includes coverage for medical treatment, assistance abroad, pregnancy/childbirth, accidents, baggage loss, damage to household furniture and civil liability. Students shall receive an insurance certificate before their arrival in the first country of residence, as well as a document outlining the general terms and conditions of the insurance policy.

Equity policies

The consortium shall be committed to ensuring equal opportunities for all students. All European institutions represented in the consortium shall be barrier-free and promote

universal access. Applicants will be asked to inform the coordinator about any special requirements. Assistance shall be provided to any students who request special support, adjustments or equipment during their study or exam period.

Accommodation

Each partner provides accommodation for students, either in the form of halls of residence or studio housing, supported by the administrative staff of the host university. This service is particularly important given that students of joint programmes change study countries much more often than their peers in regular programmes. Depending on the consortium agreement, students will either pay for their accommodation individually, or the host or sending institution will cover the costs. In the former scenario, each student shall be informed prior to arrival about the terms and conditions, including financial requirements, applicable to all accommodation options, either by the host university or by other consortium members.

Visa procedures

The consortium is committed to ensuring fast and transparent visa and residence permit procedures. Measures include:

> Upon selection, a letter of acceptance is sent to students so they can apply for a visa in a timely fashion.
> The local coordinator will provide assistance and liaise with the relevant embassies and/or immigration offices to facilitate the process.
> Students are provided with handbooks containing all necessary information.

Other administrative support

> Bank account assistance.
> Mentoring programme.
> Digital support (e.g., email accounts, university Wi-Fi access).
> International office and student services office contact details.
> Internships and exchange/mobility opportunities.
> Alumni network and student meetings.
> Intercultural training and preparation

8. Transparency and documentation

Admission requirements

Information provided by the programme consortium to prospective students at this stage may include:

> Admission criteria, such as eligible and non-eligible degree areas (for master's programmes), weighting criteria, required proficiency levels in English or other programme languages of instruction, and accepted certificates.

> Tuition fees for EU citizens and non-EU candidates.

> Application form.

> The procedure for selection of candidates.

> The date and method for announcing and publishing results.

> The process for appeals to challenge negative decisions made by the decision-making body.

> Important dates, including the deadline for submitting applications.

Curriculum

When preparing for the European Approach procedure, it is important to consider the following aspects in relation to course and syllabus availability:

> Privacy-sensitive materials used for teaching purposes.

> Materials protected by intellectual property rights.

> Policies and legal requirements applicable in each partner country.

Examination

Examination and assessment procedures are typically available on joint programme websites and each semester has a predefined set of mandatory exams and an assessment framework that outlines how students will be evaluated throughout their studies. Another method for disseminating information is to provide it directly to all students admitted to the programme, (e.g. via email.

One best practice is to publish a sample agreement between the student and the programme consortium online. Such an agreement may also cover matters related to the general data protection regulation (GDPR), ensuring that students are informed in advance that their data may be used for the purposes of programme assessment, efficient project

management and statistical preparation. This data may be disclosed to European and national bodies responsible for supervising and/or externally assessing the programme (i.e., external quality assurance agencies, Erasmus+ national agencies, the EACEA, etc.).

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