GUIDE TO EX-ANTE ACCREDITATION OF JOINT PROGRAMMES USING THE EUROPEAN APPROACH

This document forms the basis for ex-ante accreditation (verification) of joint programmes following the framework of the European Approach. The guide is intended for both the external committees and commissions and the study programmes in their process of proposal-making.

Generalitat de Catalunya

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Barcelona, 2020

Guide approved by the Institutional and Programme Assessment Committee on 19 November, 2020.

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Introduction

The European Approach is the pertinent instrument to be applied whenever Catalan universities cooperate with other European higher education institutions (HEIs) on joint programmes and programme accreditation or evaluation is mandatory in order to be recognised in Spain and by other European authorities and quality assurance agencies.

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes was adopted by European ministers responsible for higher education and was developed to facilitate external quality assurance of these 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 genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character.

The Spanish Ministry of Universities establishes ex-ante and ex-post accreditation processes so that higher education institutions can deliver study programmes that can be recognised throughout the European Higher Education Area. For this reason, joint programmes must meet the minimum requirements of the Spanish authorities in order to be recognised as official degrees.

The ex-ante accreditation standards implemented by AQU Catalunya are fully aligned with those corresponding to the European Approach. Degrees that undergo ex-ante accreditation must demonstrate that they exceed the standards corresponding to the following dimensions:

A. Programme description
B. Justification
C. Knowledge, skills and competences
D. Student access and admission
E. Study programme (curriculum)
F. Academic staff
G. Material resources and services
H. Expected outcomes
I. Quality assurance system

The methodology and standards established by AQU Catalunya fully correspond to those of the European Approach. In each dimension, the correspondence with the European Approach standards is indicated. The standards corresponding to the justification of the relevance of the qualification and the expected outcomes are not present in the European Approach and are introduced, as stated above, because they are legal requirements in Spain.

Programme description

The programme name must correspond with its content, it has to be consistent with its discipline and it must not lead to errors about its academic level or effects, or to confusion about its content and professional effects.

The terms and conditions of the joint programme should be laid down in a cooperation agreement. The agreement should in particular cover the following issues: denomination of the degree(s) awarded in the programme, coordination and responsibilities of the partners involved; admission and selection procedures for students; mobility of students and lecturers; examination regulations; student assessment methods; recognition of credits; and degree awarding procedures in the consortium.

The proposal must:

- Provide the programme name and type.
- Identify the applicant university and the HEI(s) responsible for the studies leading to the Bachelor's or Master's degree.
- Provide the degree duration both in years and in ECTS credits.
- Specify the expected number of incoming students in each academic year.
- Indicate the main characteristics of the teaching offered, such as the modality (in-person, distance education or blended learning), the teaching periods and the main language of instruction.
- Define the programme ordinances and other regulations applying to students.

Correspondence to European Approach standards

- Standard 1 "Eligibility"

Evidence

- Degree programme report
- Cooperation agreement
- Degree programme regulations

Assessment

- Coherence of the programme name with its content, discipline, and level
- Recognition of the institutions proposing the joint programme as official HEIs in their respective countries
- Completeness of the cooperation agreement and adaptation to the educational level and characteristics of the joint programme proposal
- If applicable, adherence to academic regulations

Justification

The interest of the joint programme is evident in relation to the existing offer in the European Higher Education Area. The academic interest of the proposal is justified through external references (national or international). The proposal is consistent with the potential of the applicant institution and with its tradition in offering education.

Beyond elements of supply and demand, the intrinsic interest of the proposal is based on its academic relevance that must be sustained by similar study programmes in other HEIs or by reports or white papers drafted by bodies or associations that justify the scientific and professional interest of the proposal. The institution must demonstrate potential to deliver the study programme proposed.

The HEI must also demonstrate the interest of the study programme related to the existing offer in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the link of the proposal with the priorities of the labour market and research or with the objectives of sustainable development, among other aspects. In other words, the proposal must be seen as being adapted to the needs of society and the labour market.The proposal must:

- Justify its interest in relation to the foundations of the academic discipline and, if applicable, of the professional practice.
- Justify the interest of the degree, highlighting its relevance within the context of the EHEA.
- State expected demand and employability based on data obtained from similar study programmes.
- Set out the scope of the HEI: teaching staff knowledge and experience on the subject, research groups, R&D&I, projects, scientific publications, research infrastructure, etc.
- Justify its alignment with priority research lines according to the competent administrations in this matter.

In the case of degrees that are taught in distance or blended mode, the university must justify this option and how it will ensure the intended learning outcomes.

Correspondence to European Approach standards

- Not present in the European Approach but mandatory in Spain for ex-ante accreditations.

Evidence

- Degree programme report
- Links to similar study programme curriculums
- Market studies or other feasibility and opportunity studies
- Reports on graduates' employment, reports on the potential of the institution in research and teaching, reports on society and labour market demands, etc.

Assessment

- Academic and scientific relevance of the study programme proposal
- The HEI's scope to deliver the degree
- Adaptation to social and labour market demands

Knowledge, skills and competences

Both the structure and the language used in the formulation of the learning outcomes are relevant, leading to clear and adequate wording. The competence profile is appropriate both to the disciplinary field of the degree and to the level required in the MECES.

Firstly, the study programme must state its training objectives clearly and appropriately. The orientation or focus of the degree should be established (academic, specialisation, professional, research, introductory research, etc.).

The competence profile (knowledge, skills and competences: KSCs) has to be relevant within the disciplinary field. The intended learning outcomes must correspond to those established nationally and internationally for similar study programmes. Moreover, the learning outcomes must correspond to the training level of the proposal in accordance with the Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Catalonia, the corresponding Spanish framework (MECES) and the European Qualifications Framework.

For study programmes that enable access to the practice of a regulated professional activity in Spain, the KSCs must also comply with those established in the official provisions.

Correspondence to European Approach standards

- Standard 2 "Learning Outcomes"

Evidence

- Degree programme report

Assessment

- Alignment with the disciplinary scope and educational level of the degree
Clarity in the wording and relevance of the structure

Student access and admission

The access requirements have been correctly defined. The proposal has accessible and adequate information mechanisms prior to enrolment, as well as procedures for welcoming and guiding new students. The planned support and guidance actions for students once enrolled are adequately specified. The criteria and procedures for the transfer and recognition of credits and prior learning experience are clear and adequate.

In establishing the entry profile, the proposal must include the characteristics of the newly admitted students which must ensure the acquisition of learning outcomes in the expected time. Those characteristics must be clearly identifiable, i.e., entrance qualification requirements, minimum academic requirements in other subjects, language proficiency, etc. Also, the access process must be designed in accordance with the regulations when applicable. The HEI must define the admission body and its composition must be appropriate.

Preparatory courses, when necessary, must be clearly described (type of students, credits, whether they are part of the Master's degree or not) and must be appropriate in relation to disciplines and the intended learning outcomes. It is also necessary to indicate when they should be taken and passed.

In the new degree proposal report, the information channels that will be used to inform future students about the study programme and the enrolment process must be adequately described. The information provided – before or during enrolment – must always be respectful of gender equality and sufficient for students to plan their learning process.

Likewise, welcome and guidance procedures for new students must be described, paying attention to the main actions to be carried out, the planned schedule and the bodies or units in charge. Support and guidance to students must always bear in mind the gender perspective.

The criteria and regulations for credit transfer and prior learning recognition must be clear and in accordance with regulations. The recognition process must follow the "Lisbon Convention". The body or unit involved, the criteria and the processes for recognition must be described.

Correspondence to European Approach standards

- Standard 4 "Admission and Recognition"
- Standard 6 "Student Support"

Evidence

- Degree programme report
- Links to access regulations and academic guidance
- Links to student guidance and support services
- Links to transfer and prior learning recognition regulations

Assessment

- Admission criteria adequacy, suitability and clarity
- Compliance with the Lisbon Convention and legal regulations
- Relevance to allow intended learning outcome achievement
- Adequacy of actions of support and guidance to students
- Relevance of the mechanisms and criteria for the recognition of prior learning and credit transfer

Study programme

The curriculum is consistent with the intended learning outcomes of the degree. Internal coherence is maintained between the intended learning outcomes and the teaching methods and training and examination activities.

The structure of the curriculum makes it possible to carry out all teaching and learning activities and enables adequate dedication from students. Teaching coordination and supervision mechanisms are clearly defined.

The HEI must at least specify the curriculum structure, syllabus, teaching and learning activities, examinations and academic terms. As for the subjects or modules, the institution must provide the syllabus with information on content, intended learning outcomes, ECTS credits, subject type (compulsory, optional, internship, degree project, etc.), academic term and language of tuition.

For each of the subjects, it is necessary to indicate how the learning outcomes are related to the teaching methods and the training and examination activities in order to achieve the general objectives and the competence profile of the degree. In addition, the gender perspective must be present both in the definition of learning outcomes and in the design of both teaching and examination activities.

The way in which the coordination of the teaching and learning processes and their supervision will be carried out must be made explicit. It is necessary to describe the body or bodies in charge.

When work placements are present in the curriculum, the HEI must provide information about the ECTS value, cooperating external institutions, intended learning outcomes, functions to be performed, student supervision and examination methods. Work placements must benefit from adequate management and supervision to allow students to carry out tasks that are typical of the professional field in accordance with the general objectives of the degree.

The final-year project constitutes one of the "key assignments" that shows the level of training acquired in the study programme. The final-year project has to be oriented to the performance of research, an intervention or an innovation in the professional field. Students have to integrate and apply —with professional, creative and innovative criteria— the KSC acquired throughout the degree and incorporate new ones, specifically related to the final-year project (autonomy, initiative, implementation and development of knowledge, skills and strategies previously acquired).

Student mobility actions must be described. They must be planned adequately, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be in place. These mobility actions must be consistent with the general objectives of the study programme.

Correspondence to European Approach standards

- Standard 3 "Study Programme"
- Standard 5 "Learning, Teaching and Assessment"

Evidence

- Degree programme report
- The HEI's internal regulations
- Final-year project guidelines
- Agreements with external institutions on work placements and student mobility

Assessment

- Correspondence and adaptation of the structure and content of the subjects with the discipline and the level of the degree
- Consistency with expected learning outcomes
- Adequacy of the structure of the curriculum to deliver all the planned teaching and learning activities
- Relevance of the final-year project and work placement proposals
- Student mobility action relevance

Academic staff

The academic staff are sufficient and appropriate to the number of students and the characteristics of the degree.

The teaching support staff available are also sufficient and appropriate to the number of students and the characteristics of the degree.

Teaching staff and teaching support staff must be sufficient and adequate, depending on the characteristics of the degree and the number of students. Therefore, they must have experience and qualifications appropriate to the objectives of the degree, and be sufficient in terms of the numbers and time dedicated to cover the main academic tasks: teaching and examination activities, student guidance and supervision, management activities, etc.

The HEI must include the list of the academic staff involved together with their characteristics: qualifications; accreditations; categories; teaching, research or professional experience; dedication and specialist area.

Correspondence to European Approach standards

- Standard 7.1 "Resources: Staff"

Evidence

- Degree programme report
- Link to teaching staff curricula vitae
- Consortium agreement on academic and teaching support staff

Assessment

Academic staff relevance

Academic and teaching support staff sufficiency

Material resources and services

The material resources and services available at the university and, where appropriate, arranged with other institutions outside the university (spaces, facilities, laboratories, scientific, technical or artistic equipment, library and reading rooms, new technologies, etc.) are adequate based on the number of students and in order to guarantee the achievement of learning outcomes and the development of planned training activities, observing the criteria of universal accessibility and design for all.

The HEI must provide information on the spaces and services necessary for the delivery of the study programme. They must be sufficient in relation to the students enrolled.

The HEI must also provide information on:

- Special infrastructure for the performance of certain training activities, such as group work rooms, study rooms, laboratories, etc.
- Libraries and other online documentation resources
- Technological infrastructure and learning management systems, etc.
- Other services available to students and academic staff to achieve the objectives of the curriculum (guidance services, self-learning services, psychological guidance, etc.)

These resources and services available to students must incorporate the gender perspective.

Correspondence to European Approach standards

- Standard 7.2 "Resources: Facilities"
- Standard 6 "Student Support".

Evidence

- Degree programme report

Assessment

- Adequacy of academic facilities and services to the educational objectives of the degree
- Sufficiency of academic facilities and services for the performance of teaching and learning activities

Expected outcomes

An estimation of the most relevant performance indicators should be provided (graduation, dropout and efficiency rates), as well as a general procedure to assess the progress and learning outcomes of students.

The institution should provide some indicators that make it possible to assess the expected effectiveness of the study programme, and at least the following:

- Graduation rate: The graduation rate of the year is the result of dividing the number of graduates in the reference year by the number of students who enrolled as many years back as the theoretical courses of duration of this study plan.Dropout rate: The dropout rate is calculated by dividing the number of students in a cohort who have abandoned their study programme permanently (after two years of not formalising any enrolment) by the total number of students in the reference cohort.

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- Efficiency rate: This indicates the level of success of students at the end of their study programme, having only used up credits provided in the study plan. It is the result of dividing the credits provided in the study plan by the credits for which the student enrolled, multiplied by 100 (to convert to a percentage) and taking the average for the degree including all graduate students in the academic year considered.

For the HEI, the objective of this set of indicators is to establish a reference value from which to assess the results obtained once the degree has been implemented.

The proposal must specify the expected rates for each of the teaching modalities (in-person, online or blended) in which the degree is intended to be taught, including a justification for each one.

The proposal must describe the procedures or mechanisms that will make it possible to verify and demonstrate that the skills described in the training profile have been developed throughout the programme and have been achieved at the time of graduation.

Correspondence to European Approach standards

- Not present in the European Approach but mandatory in Spain for ex-ante accreditations

Evidence

- Degree programme report

Assessment

Presence and adequate justification of the established values

Quality assurance system

The structure and composition of the body or unit in charge of the quality assurance policy is adequate. The procedures for assessing and improving the quality of both teaching and teaching staff respond to established objectives.

There are procedures for obtaining, analysing and disseminating information on student and teaching staff satisfaction and graduate job placement. That information is used for the assessment and improvement of the degree.

The criteria and procedures for possible phasing out of the degree have been defined.

The cooperating institutions must apply a joint internal quality assurance system that has to include, at least, procedures:

- For assessing and improving the quality of teaching and teaching staff.
- For guaranteeing the quality of work placements and mobility programmes.
- For analysing the job placement of graduates.
- For analysing satisfaction of the principal stakeholders (students, academic and administration staff, etc.) with the study programme.
- For the analysis of suggestions or complaints.
- For phasing out the degree when necessary.

Correspondence to European Approach standards

- Standard 8 "Transparency and Documentation"
- Standard 9 "Quality Assurance"

Evidence

- Degree programme report
- Link to detailed quality assurance system

Assessment

Relevance of the procedures described to ensure the evaluation and continuous improvement of the degree

Drafting committee

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