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**THEMATIC PEER GROUP C ON QUALITY ASSURANCE**  
**PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY**  
**Limassol (Cyprus), 29 May 2019**

Report

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# On the European Approach to the Accreditation of Joint Programmes

## Context

With the Paris Communiqué, "a structured peer support approach based on solidarity, cooperation and mutual learning" was adopted. In light of the engagements made by the ministers in the Communiqué, the work programme of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for 2018-2020, will facilitate peer support on the implementation of three key commitments:

- a three-cycle system compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA and degrees scaled by ECTS,
- compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention,
- quality assurance in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) established a coordinating body, the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG), to organise three peer groups – one for each key commitment. The peer groups include both countries that are advanced in the implementation of the key commitment concerned and countries that need to address specific challenges for full implementation of a particular key commitment at the system and institutional level.

One of the key commitments highlighted in the Paris Communiqué is quality assurance of higher education. To support the work of the Peer Group on Quality Assurance, a project was created to provide the possibility for participating countries and organisations to take part in meetings and activities. The peer group offers a platform for policy dialogue among equal partners, mutual exchanges of ideas and practices, sharing knowledge, mutual learning and understanding with regard to the implementation process (the context, the policy/policies adopted and the measures translating the key commitments at the national level).

The project enables the joining of efforts by the complete peer group. The co-chairs take into account the needs of the member countries as indicated in the implementation scorecard and the survey carried out by the BFUG secretariat. From this survey the 6 topics of the Bologna Peer Support Group were taken:

- legislative framework in line with the ESG (introducing changes)
- ensuring effectiveness of internal quality assurance arrangements, including the use of QA results in the decision-making process and quality culture as well as links to learning and teaching
- the role and engagement of stakeholders in internal and external QA (students, teachers, employers)
- Cross-border QA
- European Approach to the QA of joint programmes

At the first meeting the peer group prepared its work plan, including the topics, the working methods, timeline of activities and the expected outcomes to be achieved by each country by the end of the working period. It was also decided, based on the mutual interest of the people attending the meeting, that the topic of European Approach to the Quality Assurance of joint programmes, was the preferred topic for a PLA during the second meeting.

## **Background on Topic**

### *The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*

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

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, adopted by European Ministers responsible for higher education, has been developed to ease 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 implementation of the European Approach presents numerous challenges. In most countries that have programme accreditation, the European Approach cannot be applied or can only be applied under specific conditions. Since the development of the European Approach in 2015, only a few countries have changed legislation to enable the European Approach. Since there are various levels of integration and implementation of the European Approach across the EHEA, the Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance has identified the European Approach as a burning topic for its members. A Peer Learning Activity offered an opportunity for members to share their experiences in the implementation of the European Approach, identify the shared challenges involved and consider the way forward.

## **Scope of the Peer Learning Activity**

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 2019, in Limassol, Cyprus, a Peer Learning Activity took place with the participation of 27 countries. The aim of the Peer Learning Activity was to give members the opportunity to discuss their experiences of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and to learn from each other’s experiences. The programme consisted of a general introduction to the ‘European Approach on Quality Assurance’ by EQAR and a presentation by NVAO on ‘Bringing forward main obstacles and issues on the European approach’. This was followed by the presentation of case studies on Joint Programmes from the European Commission, Austria and the Netherlands. In the afternoon a mixed group discussion took place that focused on identifying obstacles and issues in the implementation of the EU approach. Its relevance and impact on policy and legislation were also discussed.

## **Participants**

Representatives of 27 countries and organisations took part in the second meeting of the Bologna Peer Support Group on QA. Countries were mainly represented by representatives of ministries and/or QA agencies. All representatives are officially appointed by the ministry or stakeholder organisation that takes part in the Peer Group.

## **Parallel sessions**

### *The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*

*(Colin Tück, EQAR - European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education)*

EQAR gave a brief introduction to the European Approach, explaining why this approach was developed, what it does and how it works. They also elaborated on its availability and use. The European Approach was developed as a consequence of various tests of quality assurance of Joint Programmes in an attempt to accommodate different national criteria. These pilots and attempts revealed that external QA agencies needed a common solution. Conceptually, the European Approach serves as an agreed upon, consistent European framework that addresses the need for a common, standardized solution. Tück highlighted the numerous procedures involved in the process of assuring quality in Joint Programmes. However, it was emphasized that the decisions in joint quality assurance are not always recognised within the EHEA. Tück encouraged participants in the PLA to take note of the successful examples of the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and to learn from each other.

### *Bringing forward main obstacles and issues on the European Approach for QA of JP's*

*(Mark Frederiks NVAO - Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie)*

Frederiks explained the standards in place to be able to ensure the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. He elaborated on the procedures for having an external Quality Assurance, emphasizing the importance of selecting a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency to do so. It is the responsibility of the agency to communicate appropriately with national authorities on the process, and to follow the correct procedures. Frederiks also referred to NVAO's first experiences with the European Approach and what they learned from those experiences. Currently, a slight majority of countries do not have legal obstacles for the use of the Approach, but the Approach is still limited in its implementation because of lack of experience and knowledge. Overcoming the hurdles that the administrative burden related to joint programmes pose remains, amongst other challenges, vital in ensuring a wider implementation of the European Approach.

## **Case studies**

### Case study: European Commission

#### *Activities supporting the implementation of the European Approach for the QA of Joint Programmes*

*(Klara Engels-Perenyi, Policy Officer, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, Division Youth, Education and Erasmus+, European Commission)*

In October 2018, an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree Cluster meeting on the European Approach was held. From data from the 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report, it is clear that in almost half of European countries, the European Approach is not permitted by legislation. The meeting concluded that the main challenge for Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, when applying for the European Approach is the lack of information. QA Agencies, HEI's and national authorities are often not aware of the European Approach and only very few QA Agencies have practical experience. More incentives are necessary to implement the European Approach. They also identified the need for practical toolkits, such as guidelines and

methodology, templates, webinars from experts, online platforms for sharing of best practices and trainings for the HEI's.

#### Case study: Austria

*Joint MA Political Science – Integration & Governance (PoSiG)*

*(Franz Kok, Erasmus Coordinator Political Science, Executive Director EuroPS Consortium)*

The University of Salzburg developed a joint MA program in Political Science that was accredited at a project partner via European Accreditation. This MA program was administered through the development of a multilateral management team.

The European Approach (EA) for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes was followed, because the EA approach fits the multilateral consortium management approach best. It was approved by the EACEA as a good way to offer partner support and was also encouraged by the Ministry of Science in Vienna. It was achieved by partners who developed trust and had a solid contract between partners, which led to a positive QA board decision in 2017.

There were numerous challenges involved. From external experts there were concerns about the multilateral government approach, and not all countries had the same legal frameworks. Furthermore, the confirmation of the status of HEI's in the consortium was a point for discussion. For many ministries, EA was unknown, although accreditation agencies were more informed and cooperative. There were also discussions surrounding the timelines, as it was applied differently in different countries.

For small countries, joint studies have a positive political impact, but this is not appreciated or recognised by national agencies and Ministries. It was particularly challenging acting as a front of a multilateral HEI consortium.

Kok recommended a checklist for member states about legal implementation standards that could be connected to the procedural national standards as used by agencies. A similar list containing HEI's that are eligible for joint studies could also be useful. Clear guidelines or standards for the quality of the management of joint study programmes could also serve as a basis for evaluators.

For Bologna, a European Register of EA accreditation results could be effective in streamlining the accreditation process. These results should also be implicitly confirmed by national agencies. It is only through support and capacity-building that the EA will become accepted as the new standard.

#### Case Study: The Netherlands

*EMLE's steps to the European Approach*

*(Wicher Schreuders, Erasmus University Rotterdam)*

The European Master in Law & Economics (EMLE) started in 1990 as a Joint programme. Accreditation for this programme has been essential, as it allows partners to award a degree, access funding, ask a tuition fee and apply for EU programmes and for EU funding. There are several options available for accreditation, but only the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes focuses specifically on Joint Programmes (JIP's).

There are various requirements for a Joint Programme to be accredited. This included meeting the eligibility criteria, which requires an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different HEI's from two

or more EHEA countries. There are also different kinds of Joint Programmes, such as the double/multiple degree, joint degree and a joint qualification. The EMLE meets all of the necessary criteria of an accredited joint programme.

Schreuders recommends that the text of the European Approach be carefully considered when pursuing accreditation. For example is it necessary for EA to be applied, or is optional? As a resource, the EQAR website served EMLE very well as it provided a lot of information on the EA. However, to pursue accreditation, it is important to be informed about legislation in all countries and partners. The EQAR website prompted EMLE partners to ask numerous questions about the eligibility and potential of the EA being applied in different countries. This enabled them to identify and follow the EA procedures.

There were various obstacles in applying the EA procedure. A lack of clear and structured guidelines on how to start, continue and end the procedure was lacking. It was more than a year for accreditation to be awarded, as the process is very slow. After the final decision was taken by the agency, it was also not clear what the way forward was. What should individual countries do and who is the point of contact per country? Who does the follow up – the agency or the consortium? Schreuders also called for examples of ‘best practices’ to be made available.

#### **Outcomes:**

The group discussions that took place focused on identifying obstacles and issues in the implementation of the EU approach, especially within a legal framework. The Peer Learning Activity highlighted opportunities for cooperation and lead to actionable recommendations for further facilitation and implementation of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

#### Challenges:

\*For many agencies and institutions, there exists a lack of trust in and understanding of the motivations, perspectives and expertise of foreign (EQAR registered) agencies. This means that the implementation of outside policies and practices is not embraced. As a consequence, scepticism about the efficacy of the ESG and whether it actually guarantees the quality of learning and teaching is widespread.

\*Not all countries have the necessary regulatory or legal framework for the implementation of the European Approach to the QA of Joint Programmes. Agencies rely on national legislation as their main reference, as European legislation is sometimes unclear and not always applicable or compatible with national legislation. The tension between national legislation and European legislation is a big roadblock. Should national or European legislation change during the process of accreditation, it might hamper the implementation and approval of Joint Programmes.

\* The described procedures for the implementation of joint programme accreditation are not available in all countries, or differ between countries and are open to misinterpretation and misapplication. Not all stakeholders understand the procedures in the same way.

\*The decision-making process and recognition of accreditation decisions is not clearly stated in the procedures, leading to confusion and distrust in the process and results. The procedures often take too long or are delayed between agencies who have to cooperate or make decisions.

\* In some countries there is a hesitancy to develop Joint Programmes as there is a limited demand for it and it is not normalised as part of the study prospectus.

\* On a national level, the tension between various quality assurance authorities in some countries leads to competition for resources and status, rather than cooperation in establishing Joint Programmes or developing quality assurance.

\* It is not always clear who has the final say in the development and implementation of the European Approach for quality assurance of Joint Programmes, either institutionally, nationally or internationally, so it is challenging to accept EA based decisions within the EHEA. Individuals on institutional level might feel that their contributions in Quality Assurance are negated or overruled by outside agencies, leading to a lack of commitment to the EU approach or an unwillingness to take risks.

### Solutions:

\*Institutions need to be aware that agencies providing accreditation are listed by EQAR which means they follow the ESG and ensure quality education.

\*Agencies should recognise that national legislation is not the final guide in developing quality assurance in higher education.

\*There should be more awareness amongst HEI and agencies/ authorities surrounding internationalisation and its potential benefits.

\* More information on the process and decision-making should be available for stakeholders.

\* A simpler cycle of administration with a clearer decision path will ensure more and better quality programmes.

\*Projects like EuniQ, from the NVAO, are proactively addressing quality assurance needs. Their project aims to have quality assurance approaches in place before the establishment of European Universities.

### Recommendations:

\*Develop and communicate clear unambiguous user guidelines, as these are necessary for all people involved in the procedure - for agencies, ministries and people monitoring progress. The selected agency should inform other authorities and partner agencies of these guidelines. They should also take responsibility in describing the expectations from the different stakeholders on the implementation of joint accreditation processes.

\*Include the statement on the implementation of the European Approach to the accreditation of Joint Programmes in the law or regulatory framework.

\*Develop a detailed procedure on the implementation of joint programme accreditation and make it publicly available, starting from the application of the European Approach to the recognition of the decisions.

\*When starting a collaboration to implement a Joint Programme and use the European Approach, the participating HEI and the agency (that conducts the accreditation procedure) shall collect the relevant legal requirements and policies for recognition of the accreditation decision by the national authorities and agree with the national agencies/authorities on the necessary steps to be taken in each country.

\*The recognition of the original accreditation decision in the countries of the participating HEI (if necessary) shall be quasi-automatic.



\*For legal reasons a formal decision by the competent national agency/authority might be necessary because in many countries, accreditation decisions are statutory decisions based on national administrative law and can only be taken by a designated national authority. The national agency/authority shall nostrify the original accreditation decision without re-assessing the programme and without applying additional criteria.

\*If national administrative law requires the accreditation decision to be taken in the official national language which is not English, translation from English shall comprise the decision and its justification and – if unavoidable - the panel report but not the self-assessment report.

\*The national agencies/authorities shall allow for exceptions if national regulations require validity periods of the accreditation of the programme other than six years.

\*The validity period shall begin with the date of the original accreditation decision and apply to all participating HEI consistently. Nostrifying agencies/authorities shall take this into account.

\* The national agencies/authorities of the countries of the participating HEI shall –if necessary- nostrify the original accreditation decision within six months.