

A European Approach to Quality Assurance in Joint Programs

October 2014

(approved by the EHEA Ministers in May 2015)

Joint programs are milestones of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). They are designed to promote the mobility of students and staff in order to support mutual learning and cooperation opportunities and to create programs of excellence. They offer students a genuine European learning experience. Joint degrees also express this “shared nature” in the awarding of the degree.

The European approach to quality assurance for joint programs was developed to facilitate the external quality assurance of these programs. In particular, it aims to:

- remove a major obstacle to the development of joint programs by establishing standards based on the agreed-upon tools for the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria, and
- support integrated approaches to quality assurance for joint programs that authentically reflect and mirror their joint character.

The EHEA is characterized by a diversity of approaches to external quality assurance, including accreditation, evaluation, or audit at the program and/or institutional level. While these different approaches meet the needs and requirements of their respective contexts, they find their “common denominator” in the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” (ESG).

The ESG apply to quality assurance procedures for joint programs as well as to all other types of degree programs. Therefore, the European Approach is primarily based on the ESG and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). Furthermore, the European approach takes into account the various characteristics of a joint program and specifies the “standard approach” accordingly. The procedure and criteria are closely aligned with the rules developed and tested within the JOQAR project.

“Joint Programs” are defined as an integrated curriculum that is coordinated and offered jointly by various higher education institutions from EHEA countries¹ and leads to double/multiple degrees² or a joint degree.³

¹ This decision applies to Joint Programmes offered jointly by higher education institutions from two or more countries and does not address the quality assurance of study programs offered jointly by different higher education institutions from a single country.

² Separate degrees awarded by the higher education institutions offering the joint program, confirming the successful completion of this program. (If two degrees are awarded by two higher education institutions, this constitutes a “double degree”).

³ A single document awarded by the higher education institutions offering the joint program and recognized nationally as the degree for the joint program.

A. Application in various external quality assurance systems

The European approach is applied depending on the needs of the cooperating institutions and the requirements of their national frameworks:

- If some of the cooperating institutions require external quality assurance at the program level (e.g., program accreditation or evaluation is mandatory), the cooperating institutions select a suitable quality assurance agency⁴ from the list of agencies registered with EQAR.

The agency uses the standards (Part B) and the procedure (Part C) to conduct a single evaluation or accreditation of the entire joint program. The result is accepted in all EHEA countries. As agreed in the Bucharest Communiqué, the external quality assurance decision takes effect in all countries or is recognized in all countries where the program is offered, depending on the national legal framework.

- If all cooperating higher education institutions are subject to external quality assurance only at the institutional level and have “self-accrediting status,” they may apply the European approach when establishing internal approval and monitoring processes for their joint programs (in accordance with ESG 1.2 & 1.9) if they deem this appropriate in their context.

Therefore, in these cases, no additional external evaluation or accreditation procedures are required at the program level.

- The European Approach can also be applied to joint programs offered by higher education institutions both within and outside the EHEA. Affected higher education institutions from non-EHEA countries are encouraged to determine whether their national authorities would accept the standards (Part B) and, if applicable, would be able to accept the decision of an agency registered with EQAR.

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

1. Eligibility

1.1 Status

The higher education institutions offering a joint program are⁵ recognized as higher education institutions by the competent authorities of their respective countries. Their respective national legal frameworks permit them to participate in the joint program and, where applicable, to award a joint degree. The higher education institutions awarding the degree(s) ensure that the degree(s) meet the

⁴ In the case of joint programs leading to qualifications that aim to meet the agreed minimum continuing education requirements for a profession in accordance with Directive 2005/636/EC, the joint program must be notified to the European Commission by the competent authority of an EU Member State. The cooperating higher education institutions must take this into account when identifying and contacting an agency to carry out the procedure.

⁵ The binding nature of the term “should” used in the English version is rendered in German by the indicative mood.

take into account the relevant requirements of the country in which they are located.

1.2 Joint Design and Implementation

The Joint Programme is offered jointly, and all cooperating institutions are involved in the design and implementation of the programme.

1.3 Cooperation Agreement

The provisions of the Joint Program are set forth in a cooperation agreement. The agreement covers the following topics in particular:

- Designation of the degree(s) awarded in the program
- Coordination and responsibilities of the involved partners regarding management and financial organization (including funding, allocation of costs and revenues, etc.)
- Admission and selection procedures for students
- Mobility of students and faculty
- Examination regulations, methods for assessing students, recognition of credits, and procedures for awarding degrees within the consortium.

2. Learning Outcomes

2.1 Level [ESG 1.2]

The intended learning outcomes are aligned with the corresponding level in the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) as well as with the applicable national qualifications frameworks.

2.2 Academic disciplines

The intended learning outcomes include knowledge, skills, and competencies in the respective discipline(s).

2.3 Achievement of Learning Outcomes [ESG 1.2]

It can be demonstrated that the program achieves the intended learning outcomes.

2.4 Regulated professions

Where relevant to the specific joint program, the agreed minimum continuing education requirements specified in European Union Directive 2005/36/EC are taken into account. This also applies to the corresponding joint continuing education frameworks established under the directive.

3. Program [ESG 1.2]

3.1 Curriculum

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

3.2 Credit Points

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is correctly applied, and the distribution of credit points is clearly regulated.

3.3 Workload

A joint bachelor's program typically involves a student workload of 180–240 ECTS credits; for a joint master's program, the workload is typically 90–120 ECTS credits, and no fewer than 60 ECTS credits (the credit ranges are based on the QF-EHEA); for joint doctoral programs (joint doctorates), no credit ranges have been established.

The workload and the average time required to complete the program are monitored.

4. Admission and Recognition [ESG 1.4]

4.1. Admission

The admission requirements and selection procedures are appropriate given the level and the discipline in which the program is situated.

4.2. Recognition

The recognition of qualifications and periods of study (including recognition of prior learning) is carried out in accordance with the Lisbon Convention and supplementary documents.

5. Study, Teaching, and Examinations [ESG 1.3]

5.1 Study and Teaching

The program's design and the teaching and learning methods used are geared toward achieving the intended learning outcomes. The diversity of students and their needs is respected and taken into account, particularly with regard to the students' potentially diverse cultural backgrounds.

5.2 Student Assessment/Examinations

The examination regulations and the assessment of achieved learning outcomes align with the intended learning outcomes and are consistently applied by the partner universities.

6. Student Support [ESG 1.6]

Student support contributes to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. In doing so, the specific needs of mobile students are taken into account.

7. Resources [ESG 1.5 & 1.6]

7.1 Staffing

Staffing levels are sufficient in terms of both quantity and quality (qualifications, professional and international experience) to implement the degree programs.

7.2 Material resources

The facilities provided are sufficient and appropriate in relation to the intended learning outcomes.

8. Transparency and Documentation [ESG 1.8]

Relevant information about the program, such as admission requirements and procedures, course catalog, examination and assessment procedures, etc., is documented and published, taking into account the specific needs of mobile students.

9. Quality Assurance [ESG 1.1 & Part 1]

The cooperating institutions apply common internal quality assurance processes in accordance with Part One of the ESG.

C. Procedures for External Quality Assurance of Joint Programs in the EHEA

The cooperating higher education institutions jointly select a suitable quality assurance agency registered with the EQAR. The agency communicates appropriately with the relevant national authorities in the countries where the institutions are located.

1. Self-Evaluation Report [ESG 2.3]

The external quality assurance procedure is based⁽⁶⁾ on a Self-Evaluation Report (SER) submitted jointly by the cooperating higher education institutions. The SER contains comprehensive information demonstrating the program's compliance with the standards for quality assurance of joint programs in the EHEA (Part B).

In addition, the report contains the necessary information on the respective national frameworks of the cooperating higher education institutions, which foreign agencies and experts may require in order to assess the context, particularly with regard to the program's classification within the national higher education systems.

⁶ The non-binding nature of the term "should" used in the English version is reflected in German by the indicative mood.

The SER explicitly focuses on the specific characteristics of the Joint Program as a joint endeavor of higher education institutions from more than one national higher education system.

2. Expert Review Group [ESG 2.3 & 2.4]

The Agency appoints an expert group consisting of at least four members. The expert group combines expertise in the relevant subjects or disciplines, including the labor market/working world in the relevant fields, with expertise in the area of quality assurance in higher education.

Thanks to its international expertise and experience, the expert group can take into account the specific characteristics of the Joint Program. The expert group as a whole possesses knowledge of the higher education systems of the participating institutions as well as the languages of instruction used. The expert group includes members from at least two countries participating in the consortium offering the program. At least one student is represented in the expert group.

The Agency ensures the impartiality of the experts and upholds fairness toward the institutions concerned. To this end, the institutions have the right to raise substantiated objections to an evaluator; however, there is no right of veto against an appointment.

The Agency informs the experts about the evaluation process, their specific role, and the particularities of the quality assurance procedure. The preparation focuses primarily on the specific characteristics of a joint program.

3. Site Visit [ESG 2.3]

The site visit enables the review panel to discuss the joint program based on the self-report and to assess whether the program meets the standards (Part B).

The site visit therefore includes discussions with representatives from all participating institutions, particularly with institutional leadership and program coordinators, staff, students, and other relevant stakeholders such as alumni and representatives from the professional field.

Although the site visit is normally limited to one location, the implementation of the program at all locations is taken into account in the evaluation.

4. Report [ESG 2.3 & 2.6]

The review panel prepares a report containing relevant evidence, analyses, and conclusions with reference to the standards (Part B). The report also includes recommendations for the program's further development. Should the review lead to a formal outcome, the review panel issues a recommendation for the decision.

The conclusions and recommendations pay particular attention to the specific characteristics of the joint program.

The universities are given the opportunity to comment on the draft version of the report, including to point out any factual errors.

5. Formal Results and Decision [ESG 2.5]

If necessary, the Agency shall make a decision based on the expert opinion and the recommendation for the decision, taking into account the comments of the higher education institutions. If the evaluation leads to an accreditation decision, the Agency shall grant or deny accreditation (with or without conditions) based on the standards (Part B). The Agency is free to supplement the formal result and the accreditation decision with recommendations.

The Agency shall provide a rationale for its accreditation decision. This applies in particular to accreditation decisions subject to conditions or negative decisions, and to cases in which the decision deviates from the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation team.

6. Appeal [ESG 2.7]

Higher education institutions have the right to file an appeal against a formal outcome or an accreditation decision. To this end, the Agency has a formalized appeals procedure in place.

7. Accountability [ESG 2.6]

The Agency publishes the report and, where applicable, the formal outcome or accreditation decision on its website. If the evaluation was not conducted in English, at least an English summary of the report and an English version of the decision, including its rationale, are published.

8. Follow-up [ESG 2.3]

The Agency agrees on a follow-up procedure with the cooperating agencies to assess, where applicable, the fulfillment of conditions and/or the follow-up measures resulting from the recommendations.

9. Frequency [ESG 1.10]

The Joint Programme shall be reviewed every six years; the period must be specified in the published decision. If an accreditation decision is made, it shall be granted for a period of six years in the event of a positive outcome.⁷ During the six-year period, the Agency shall be informed of any changes to the consortium offering the Joint Programme.

⁷ A six-year period is widely applied in EHEA countries.