



Agency for  
Quality Assurance  
and Accreditation  
Austria

# European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

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## Background

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 present European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has been developed to ease external quality assurance of these programmes. In particular, it will:

- dismantle an important obstacle to the development of joint programmes by setting
- standards for these programmes that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA,
- without applying additional national criteria, and
- facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes that
- genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character.

The EHEA is characterised by a diversity of approaches to external QA, including accreditation, evaluation or audit at the level of study programmes and/or institutions. While responding to the needs and requirements of their respective context, these different approaches 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 of joint programmes as to all other types of programmes. Thus, the European Approach is mainly based on the ESG and on the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). In addition, the European Approach takes into account the distinctive features of a joint programme and, thus, specifies the ‘standard’ approach accordingly. The procedure and criteria are closely based on those developed and tested within the JOQAR project.

“Joint programmes” are understood as an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from EHEA countries<sup>1</sup>, and leading to double/multiple degrees<sup>2</sup> or a joint degree<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This proposal relates only to joint programmes offered jointly by higher education institutions from two or more countries, and does not address the quality assurance of programmes delivered jointly by different institutions from a single country.

<sup>2</sup> Separate degrees awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme attesting the successful completion of this programme. (If two degrees are awarded by two institutions, this is a ‘double degree’).

<sup>3</sup> A single document awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme and nationally acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme.

## A. Application in Different Systems of External QA

The European Approach should be applied depending on the needs of the cooperating higher education institutions and the requirements of their national frameworks:

- If some of the **cooperating higher education institutions require external quality assurance at programme level** (e.g. programme accreditation or evaluation is mandatory), then the cooperating institutions should select a suitable quality assurance agency<sup>4</sup> from the list of EQAR-registered agencies.
- The agency will use the Standards (part B) and the Procedure (part C) to carry out a single evaluation or accreditation of the entire joint programme. The result is to be accepted in all EHEA countries. Dependent on the national legal framework, the external quality assurance decision should come into force or be recognised in all countries where the programme is offered, as agreed in the Bucharest Communiqué.
- If **all cooperating higher education institutions** are subject to **external quality assurance at institutional level** only and have "self-accrediting" status, they may use the European Approach in setting up joint internal approval and monitoring processes for their joint programmes (according to ESG 1.2 & 1.9), if they deem it useful in their context.
- Hence, in these cases no additional external evaluation or accreditation procedures at the programme level are necessary.
- The European Approach may also be used for joint programmes that are offered by higher education institutions from both within and outside the EHEA. Involved institutions from non-EHEA countries are encouraged to inquire whether their national authorities would accept the Standards (part B) and be able to recognise the decision of an EQAR-registered agency, if applicable.

<sup>4</sup> In the case of joint programmes that lead to qualifications aiming to satisfy the minimum agreed training conditions in a profession subject to the European Union Directive 2005/36/EC, the joint programme would need to be notified to the European Commission by the competent authority of one EU Member State. The cooperating institutions will need to bear this in mind when identifying and contacting an agency to conduct the review.

## B. Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA

### 1. Eligibility

#### 1.1 Status

The institutions that offer a joint programme should<sup>5</sup> be recognised as higher education institutions by the relevant authorities of their countries. Their respective national legal frameworks should enable them to participate in the joint programme and, if applicable, to award a joint degree. The institutions awarding the degree(s) should ensure that the degree(s) belong to the higher education degree systems of the countries in which they are based.

#### 1.2 Joint design and delivery

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

#### 1.3 Cooperation Agreement

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 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.

### 2. Learning Outcomes

#### 2.1 Level [ESG 1.2]

The intended learning outcomes should align with the corresponding level in the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA), as well as the applicable national qualifications framework(s).

#### 2.2 Disciplinary field

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

#### 2.3 Achievement [ESG 1.2]

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

#### 2.4 Regulated Professions

<sup>5</sup> The Standards use of the common English usage of "should" which has the connotation of prescription and compliance.

If relevant for the specific joint programme, the minimum agreed training conditions specified in the European Union Directive 2005/36/EC, or relevant common trainings frameworks established under the Directive, should be taken into account.

### **3. Study Programmes [ESG 1.2]**

#### **3.1 Curriculum**

The structure and content of the curriculum should be fit to enable the students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

#### **3.2 Credits**

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

#### **3.3 Workload**

A joint bachelor programme will typically amount to a total student workload of 180-240 ECTS-credits; a joint master programme will typically amount to 90-120 ECTS-credits and should not be less than 60 ECTS-credits at second cycle level (credit ranges according to the FQ-EHEA); for joint doctorates there is no credit range specified.

The workload and the average time to complete the programme should be monitored.

### **4. Admission and Recognition [ESG 1.4]**

#### **4.1 Admission**

The admission requirements and selection procedures should be appropriate in light of the programme's level and discipline.

#### **4.2 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.

### **5. Learning, Teaching and Assessment [ESG 1.3]**

#### **5.1 Learning and teaching**

The programme should be designed to correspond with the intended learning outcomes, and the learning and teaching approaches applied should be adequate to achieve those. The diversity of students and their needs should be respected and attended to, especially in view of potential different cultural backgrounds of the students.

#### **5.2 Assessment of students**

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

### **6. Student Support [ESG 1.6]**

The student support services should contribute to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. They should take into account specific challenges of mobile students.

## **7. Resources [ESG 1.5 & 1.6]**

### **7.1 Staff**

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

### **7.2 Facilities**

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

## **8. Transparency and Documentation [ESG 1.8]**

Relevant information about the programme like admission requirements and procedures, course catalogue, examination and assessment procedures etc. should be well documented and published by taking into account specific needs of mobile students.

## **9. Quality Assurance [ESG 1.1 & part 1]**

The cooperating institutions should apply joint internal quality assurance processes in accordance with part one of the ESG.

## C. Procedure for External Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA

The cooperating institutions should jointly select a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency. The agency should communicate appropriately with the competent national authorities of the countries in which the cooperating higher education institutions are based.

### 1. Self-Evaluation Report [ESG 2.3]

The external quality assurance procedure should<sup>6</sup> be based on a self-evaluation report (SER) jointly submitted by the cooperating institutions. The SER should contain comprehensive information that demonstrates the compliance of the programme with the Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA (part B).

In addition, the report should contain the necessary information about the respective national frameworks of the cooperating institutions that foreign agencies and experts might need in order to appreciate the context, especially the positioning of the programme within the national higher education systems.

The SER should focus explicitly on the distinctive feature of the joint programme as a joint endeavour of higher education institutions from more than one national higher education system.

### 2. Review Panel [ESG 2.3 & 2.4]

The agency should appoint a panel of at least four members. The panel should combine expertise in the relevant subject(s) or discipline(s), including the labour market/world of work in the relevant field(s), and expertise in quality assurance in higher education.

Through their international expertise and experience the panel should be able to take into account the distinctive features of the joint programme. Collectively, the panel should possess knowledge of the HE systems of the HEIs involved and the language(s) of instruction used. The panel should include members from at least two countries involved in the consortium providing the programme. The panel should include at least one student.

When selecting peers, [AQ Austria](#) takes care that the following competences are covered by the group of experts, taking into account the requirements on a case-by-case basis: proven scientific qualification in the relevant discipline; knowledge of relevant professional fields based on pertinent vocational activities; teaching experience as well as experience in the development, implementation and evaluation of curricula; verifiable international experience; experience in management and organisational structures of joint programmes; recent student experience based on pertinent studies.

<sup>6</sup> The Procedure uses of the common English usage of "should" which has the connotation of prescription and compliance.



AQ Austria takes in addition care that the composition of the review panel is diverse and that its gender ratio is balanced.

AQ Austria takes care that review panel members are independent and unbiased. They shall declare in writing that there are no grounds for prejudice and that they will keep all facts they become aware of in relation with their work as peers confidential.

The agency should ensure the impartiality of the experts and observes fairness towards the applying higher education institutions. To this end, the institutions should have the right to raise well-grounded objections against a panel member, but not a right to veto their appointment.

AQ Austria allows the consortium represented by the lead partner/higher education institution an adequate period of time for raising objections against experts. The higher education institution does not have the right to propose experts. AQ Austria will examine any objections and, if necessary, it will appoint a new expert.

The agency should brief the experts on the review activity, their specific role, and the specifics of the quality assurance procedure. The briefing should focus particularly on the distinctive features of a joint programme.

As preparation, AQ Austria takes care that the review panel members receive all application documents, all information necessary for their activities as experts, the relevant legal bases as well as all documents necessary for the organisation and administration of the procedure in good time before the site visit.

As a further step, a virtual or telephone conference is held in timely manner prior to the site visit. This conference serves various purposes, such as providing the opportunity for the review panel members to meet and to become acquainted with the procedural background, to provide room for discussing the first impressions of the application and of issues regarding the degree programme, clarifying the role of the experts and allocating tasks, content-wise preparation and organisation of the site visit, etc.

AQ Austria takes care that the review panel and the project-coordinator responsible for the procedure will have an opportunity to meet, generally as part of a preliminary discussion on the evening before the site visit. The focus lies on the concrete schedule for the site visit, which shall be the result of the preparations, on an indepth discussion of the impressions of the application, on the discussion of questions regarding the degree programme and on the content-related coordination within the expert panel regarding their tasks and responsibilities as to the site visit and the preparation of the expert report.

The experts are to be informed about the application and the applicant institution as well as about the aspects of the application meriting special scrutiny to guarantee that the experts retain the greatest possible objectivity.

### **3. Site Visit [ESG 2.3]**

The site visit should enable the review panel to discuss the joint programme based on the self-evaluation report and assess whether the programme complies with the Standards (part B).

The site visit should therefore include discussions with representatives of all cooperating institutions and in particular the management of the institutions and the programme, the staff, the students, and other relevant stakeholders, such as alumni and the professional field.

Although the site visit should normally be restricted to one location, the provision at all locations has to be taken into account.

The evaluation is combined with a site visit of the experts to **one location of the Joint programme** which is organised and accompanied by the project coordinator of AQ Austria. Depending on the individual procedure, the site visit may take one to three days. AQ Austria takes care that the experts are thoroughly prepared for the site visit.

**AQ Austria** applies the following principles to the organisation and agenda of the site visit:

- The project coordinator shall thoroughly prepare the experts for the site visit.
- Experts, the project coordinator as well as representatives of the consortium participate in the site visit.
- The experts name those groups with which they intend to have talks. The consortium selects suitable persons for each group and ensures that knowledgeable persons are available for all subject areas.
- The student representatives are selected by the students' council of the higher education institution at which the site visit takes place or of the consortium from a student board that represents students from the joint programme.
- As a rule, experts also inspect the facilities and the infrastructure of the at one location of the consortium; the consortium takes care that the experts have sufficient information to take provision at all locations of the consortium into account.

## 4. Review Report [ESG 2.3 & 2.6]

The review panel should prepare a report that contains relevant evidence, analysis and conclusions with regard to the Standards (part B). The report should also contain recommendations for developing the programme further. In case the review results in a formal outcome the review panel should make a recommendation for the decision.

The conclusions and recommendations should pay particular attention to the distinctive features of the joint programme.

The institutions should have the opportunity to comment on a draft version of the review report and request correction of factual errors.

**AQ Austria** takes care that the experts draw up a joint report, including statements on the joint programme and an assessment on whether the standards are categorised as "met", or "not met". The following applies:

**Statements and assessment** for each standard according to the European approach need to be drawn up.

**Statements** are based on the provided evidence (Self-Documentation plus additional written material provided prior or during the site visit, oral testimonies during interviews). **Explicit reference** to the written documents, oral testimonies (of higher education staff, students etc.), and any other available evidence when and if applicable should be made.

*If a standard has been assessed as "not met" this means that deficiencies were detected that will lead to **conditions**. Conditions have to be fulfilled with a given period in order to be able to assess a standard as "met".*

**Recommendations** are weaker than conditions. They do not necessarily need to be fulfilled for a standard to be met.

The joint review panel report is drawn up respecting the diversity of peers' opinions, while at the same time aiming at a consensus on a basis that is as broad as possible. If diverging peers' opinions cannot be eliminated, they will be expressed in the report.

The preliminary review panels' report is handed over to the consortium, which gets the opportunity to point out any potential factual or formal errors. The review panel will take the consortium comments into account for their final version of the report. The consortium will comment on the contents of the final report.

## **5. Formal Outcomes and Decision [ESG 2.5]**

If required, the agency should take a decision on the basis of the review report and the recommendation for the decision, considering the comments by the higher education institutions as appropriate. In case the review results in an accreditation decision, it grants or denies the accreditation (with or without conditions), based on the Standards (part B). The agency may supplement the formal outcome and the accreditation decision by recommendations.

The agency should give reasons for its accreditation decision. This applies in particular for accreditation decisions limited by conditions or negative decisions and for cases where the decision differs from the review panel's conclusions and recommendation for the decision.

The Board of **AQ Austria** will make a decision on accreditation based on the final version of the peers' report and on the higher education institution's comment on its contents.

Accreditation can be granted without or with conditions and is limited to a six-year period.

If the accreditation decision is positive, AQ Austria will issue a certificate to the consortium.

The accreditation report of the review panel and the consortium statement constitute the basis for the accreditation decision, which is taken by the 14-members-board of AQ Austria. There are three options for the decision:

### **Accreditation without conditions**

The quality requirements are being met. Any recommendations given on the basis of expert opinion are supposed to help the consortium to continuously develop the joint programme.

#### **Accreditation with conditions**

Accreditation with conditions will only be granted if standards have been assessed as “not met” and detected deficiencies are likely to be corrected within nine months. Within nine months the consortium proves that the conditions have been met, and this will be verified by AQ Austria. As a rule, at least one review panel member will be involved in examining whether the conditions are fulfilled.

#### **Denial of accreditation**

Accreditation will be denied when the joint programme shows serious identifiable shortcomings. This applies when standards have been assessed as “not met” and deficiencies detected are not likely to be corrected within nine months.

## **6. Appeals [ESG 2.7]**

The institutions should have the right to appeal against a formal outcome or an accreditation decision. Therefore, the agency should have a formalised appeals procedure in place.

AQ Austria has an Appeals Committee that deals with and rules on appeals and objections filed by educational institutions against procedures and certification decisions. Within the framework of quality assurance procedures at foreign higher education institutions resulting in a formal decision of the Board the Appeals Committee shall deal with and decide on appeals lodged by the consortium against the procedure as such and against the final decision of the Board.

## **7. Reporting [ESG 2.6]**

The agency should publish the review report and, if applicable, the formal outcome or the accreditation decision on its website. In case the review was not conducted in English at least an English summary of the review report and an English version of the decision, including its reasons, should be published.

After the procedure has been completed, AQ Austria will publish a report on the findings of the accreditation procedure, which includes the review panel report, the consortiums comment, and the decision of the Board including the reasons for the decision as well as any conditions. This report on the findings will be published on the AQ Austria website. Any personal data, funding sources and business or trade secrets are exempt from publication.

## **8. Follow-up [ESG 2.3]**

The agency should agree with the cooperating institutions a follow-up procedure to assess the fulfilment of conditions – if applicable – and/or to evaluate the follow-up actions on recommendations – if applicable.

## **9. Periodicity [ESG 1.10]**

The joint programme should be reviewed periodically every 6 years, which should be specified in the published decision. If there is an accreditation decision it should be granted –

if the decision is positive – for a period of 6 years.<sup>7</sup> During the 6-year period, the agency should be informed about changes in the consortium offering the joint programme.

AQ Austria grants accreditation without or with conditions limited to a six-year period.

<sup>7</sup> A period of 6 years is widely applied in EHEA countries.

## Annex: ESG Standards Part 1 and Part 2

### Part 1: Standards for internal quality assurance

- **1.1 Policy for quality assurance:** Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.<sup>8</sup>
- **1.2 Design and approval of programmes<sup>9</sup>:** Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.
- **1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment:** Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.
- **1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification:** 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.
- **1.5 Teaching staff:** Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.
- **1.6 Learning resources and student support:** Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.
- **1.7 Information management:** Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.
- **1.8 Public information:** Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.
- **1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes:** 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.
- **1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance:** Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise specified, in the document stakeholders are understood to cover all actors within an institution, including students and staff, as well as external stakeholders such as employers and external partners of an institution.

<sup>9</sup> The term "programme" in these standards refers to higher education provision in its broadest sense, including provision that is not part of a programme leading to a formal degree.

## Part 2: Standards for external quality assurance

- **2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance:** External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance described in Part 1 of the ESG.
- **2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose:** External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.
- **2.3 Implementing processes:** External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include
  - a self-assessment or equivalent;
  - an external assessment normally including a site visit;
  - a report resulting from the external assessment;
  - a consistent follow-up.
- **2.4 Peer-review experts:** External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).
- **2.5 Criteria for outcomes:** Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.
- **2.6 Reporting:** Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.
- **2.7 Complaints and appeals:** Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.