



Erasmus+

Conclusions - EMJMD Cluster Meeting on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

24-25 October 2018





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Conclusions of the EMJMD Cluster Meeting on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

Brussels, 24 and 25 of October 2018

Background and aim of the Cluster meeting

On 24th and 25th October 2018, coordinators of all ongoing Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (EMJMDs) selected between 2014 and 2018 were invited to the EMJMD Cluster Meeting on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA).

"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."¹

The main objective of the event was to provide participants with more information on the EA and offer a forum for knowledge sharing, exchange of experiences and good practices. In line with the current policy priorities in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the EA aims to support external Quality Assurance. It was adopted in April 2015 by the Ministers of Education from the EHEA in the Yerevan Communiqué² and defines standards that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria.

"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."³*

The event brought together around 170 participants from EMJMD consortia, representatives from Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies and other practitioners, ICPs from Erasmus+ National Agencies, EMA representatives and colleagues from DG EAC and EACEA.

Interactive thematic workshops, practical hands-on sessions, structured networking opportunities and a specific "Helpdesk" where EMJMD coordinators could consult practitioners were designed to accompany EMJMDs during their first steps in the journey to accreditation under the EA.

¹ European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/73/1/European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_613731.pdf

² 2015 Yerevan Ministerial Conference <http://www.ehea.info/cid101764/yerevan.html>

³ Ibid 1

The Agenda and all presentations are available on the event [website](#) of the Cluster meeting.⁴

During the event, the participants met and discussed on the added value, the potential challenges for EMJMDs when applying for the European Approach for Quality Assurance and the support needed from different stakeholders. Moreover, they defined the essential elements of an action plan and road map for applying for accreditation under the EA. The main results of their discussions are summarised below:

What is the added value of the European Approach for EMJMD programmes? (Programme vs institutional accreditation, Internal and external Quality Assurance, Setting agreed standards and tools, Reduction of administrative burden, Cost efficiency, etc.)

Based on the input and testimonials provided during the plenary sessions, the participants reflected, in small rotating groups, on the added value, potential challenges and obstacles, and support needed throughout the accreditation process under the EA.

The EA is expected to contribute to enhance institutional trust among participants within the consortia. As all universities need to work together to obtain a single accreditation and formalize the process to reach their shared objective, the cooperation between their different institutions would be improved and strengthened as a result.

The participants concluded that the EA could provide added value for the consortia cooperation and improve the quality of the EMJMDs through the recommendations from the experts' panel.

Indeed, the Quality Assurance system is more transparent by applying one single procedure to the joint programme and a harmonized quality approach. The increased clarity and transparency would have a positive impact on the Master's implementation and external image, e.g. from the point of view of students and external stakeholders including representatives from the world of work.

On a more practical side, applying for the EA could reduce the administrative workload for the consortia members, as all partners and departments within the member universities of the consortia would work on a synchronised time-frame, possibly saving time, costs and resources, if national processes could be substituted by one overall procedure.

Coordinators also agreed that the EA could be a suitable approach for newly established programmes to avoid "newcomer mistakes". In this context, it is expected that EMJMDs would benefit from the knowledge of the then experienced QAA Agencies in the long run.

⁴ Website of the Cluster meeting: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/cluster-meeting-2018-european-approach-quality-assurance-joint-programmes_en

Finally, the participants stressed that implementing the EA in EMJMDs would contribute to raising awareness of decision makers and other stakeholders and thereby making the EA widely used in the European Higher Education Area.

What are the challenges and obstacles related to the implementation of the European Approach? (National legislations, National requirements, Language issues, Access to information, Terminology and definitions, Recognition, etc.)

A main challenge for EMJMDs when applying for the EA is the lack of information on procedures and outcomes. Materials including concise information (e.g. manuals, guidelines, overall frameworks, templates for applications, list of requirements) would provide guidance and help newcomers to the EA to avoid mistakes during the first steps of the application process. Moreover, there is a need for further knowledge transfer: the different stakeholders involved (European Commission, EACEA, EQAR and ENQA) need to make the QAA Agencies, the national authorities and the Higher Education Institutions more aware of the EA.

Some of the participants thought that a preliminary clarification and definition of the concept of "jointness" is necessary. Other coordinators were in favour of keeping certain flexibility from the side of the QAA Agencies to take into account the diversity of the EMJMDs and their specificity as joint programmes.

Trust can be also seen as a challenge and as a prerequisite for implementing the EA. Trust is needed between all participating institutions when sharing the workload and costs and dealing with specific administrative and linguistic challenges and procedures, that require extra efforts and - depending on the composition of the consortium - extra costs.

Higher Education Institutions wishing to apply for the EA face systemic challenges as in some countries the EA is not recognised by the national legislation, and in other countries the EA is recognised but not implemented. To overcome these challenges, the participants stated that there is a need for harmonisation of national legislations regarding the EA.

Some coordinators suggested to implement incentives (e.g. "lighter version" of the EA for EMJMDs; financial support to accreditation costs, given that an accreditation under the EA has a cost while a national accreditation is in some cases free of charge).

The added value of accreditation under the EA needs to be clearly communicated to all stakeholders involved, in particular in countries where system accreditation applies.

Which support would you need from the different stakeholders? (Institutional support, QAA Agencies, National authorities, Erasmus+ National Agencies, ENQA, EQAR, DG EAC and EACEA, etc.)

Participants stressed the need for practical information material and toolkits, such as guidelines and methodology, templates, webinars from experts, online platforms for sharing of best practices and trainings for the HEIs. It was suggested to gather all the useful information in one website addressing all target groups.

Stakeholders such as the European Commission, EACEA and EQAR should put in place a targeted promotion of the EA towards the national authorities to involve them more actively in the dissemination and awareness raising process.

Promotion should also be directed towards the management level of the HEIs implementing EMJMD projects in order to ensure institution support.

Cooperation needs to be reinforced between all different stakeholders (European Commission, EACEA, Ministries, Erasmus+ NA, QAA Agencies, HEI, EQAR, ENIC-NARIC, etc.).

Preparation of an Action plan and Road map - EMJMD application for accreditation under the European Approach for Quality Assurance

Participants discussed the essential elements of an action plan and road map for applying for accreditation under the EA, the milestones, timing, and the stakeholders involved in the process. They used the input and testimonials provided during the plenary sessions to feed their discussions.

It was agreed that it is fundamental to have an effective action plan and a clear road map for applying for the EA since the beginning of the process, in order to prevent related risks. It is also very important to ensure the involvement of the whole EMJMD consortium through the entire process, and create a feeling of ownership amongst all the partners.

Participants defined the following main milestones:

- *Agreement and involvement of the partners*: The decision to start with the EA application process appeared to the participants to be the most difficult and lengthy step. The consortium needs to be fully committed to the process and evaluate the added value for the programme against the extra costs and additional long-term workload for all partners. In order to ensure efficiency, prevent related risks and fully involve all partners, the added value should benefit all institutions equally and the respective commitment of each partner should be clearly defined from the outset in a well-structured action plan, timeline and checklist, including details of financial and management shares. The exercise should be jointly implemented throughout the duration of the process. Experienced participants mentioned that the exercise should start at least 1 year in advance, as the duration of the whole application process may last 1 to 1 year and a half.
- *Choosing a suitable EQAR-registered Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency* and plan the process with the chosen agency to carry out a single procedure for the entire joint programme accreditation. EQAR lists the QAA agencies that comply with the ESG. Attendants underlined that legislation in all (consortium) countries should therefore be consulted beforehand and considered when choosing an EQAR registered QAA agency. Other important aspects are the working language of the agency, the specific procedures and regimes concerning site visits, panels, reports and decisions, as they may differ between

agencies. Some participants underlined the necessity to take into account the experience, the costs and the location of an agency.

- *The self-evaluation report:* The participants agreed that once the above decisions have been taken, the preparation of the self-evaluation report seems to be the comparably easier part of the application process. The self-evaluation should demonstrate how the EMJMD fulfils the quality standards and therefore summarises all the details of the programme that guarantee its quality. The goal is to present the added value of the joint delivery of the programme, focusing on the international aspect of the programme and the "jointness" of its implementation, management, student assessment and diploma recognition. It should demonstrate the compliance of the programme with the ESG, and it should also contain the necessary information about the respective national frameworks of all partners to make it easier for experts to understand the context. The role and the assets of involving each consortium partner should also be explained in order to indicate their impact on the quality of the programme. The ownership of the self-evaluation report should be shared between all concerned partners to reflect the "jointness" of the programme.
- *The site visit:* It was agreed that the site visit should be organised following the same principles as the self-evaluation report given that its purpose is to demonstrate how the programme fulfils the quality criteria. In order to prove the "jointness" and quality of the programme, the visit should take place at the most favourable moment for the visiting panel to meet the maximum number important stakeholders (alumni, students, management and academic staff from all partner institutions including from associate partners). It is important to keep in mind that the findings of the divers consultations are also assessed against the ESG, and that all necessary information for the assessment of the course should be submitted before and/or during the site visit.
- *The review report and the decision:* Experienced participants indicated that the onsite visit panel is concluded with a verbal reporting session in which the panel sets out its initial provisional recommendations. The panels of experts will then prepare a report with its accreditation decision as well as their conclusions and recommendations for developing the programme further, if necessary.

Moreover, experienced coordinators mentioned that in their specific case, some recommendations required changes in the course content, and time was given to the programme to implement them.

If the EMJMD programme does not agree with the findings of the experts panel, they have the possibility to submit an appeal. If the process ends with a positive accreditation decision, the involved partners should launch the recognition process in all participating countries. Despite the commitment of the Bucharest Communiqué (2012)⁵ "to recognise Quality Assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes",

⁵ The 2012 Bucharest Communiqué: <http://ehea.hyperion.education.gouv.fr/cid101043/ministerial-conference-bucharest-2012.html>

the full recognition of formal outcomes resulting from a single external Quality Assurance procedure still remains complex.

General conclusions and key messages

European Approach State of play

- Only very few EMJMD projects are already involved in the process to apply for accreditation under the EA but a high interest was expressed by the big majority of coordinators in the framework of the Cluster meeting and the preceding survey sent by EACEA in March 2018.
- Harmonisation on the EA is needed within the EHEA countries (Some countries do not recognise the EA, others do recognise it but it is not implemented, etc.). As a result, international consortia involving those countries face difficulties and hesitate to apply for accreditation under the EA.
- There is a lack of information on the EA at all levels and a need for standard documents and standard approaches when implementing the EA.
- The EA remains a difficult and complex procedure. There is a lack of awareness and support and in addition to that, at university level, the EA is not considered a priority by the management. Therefore the added value of the EA needs to be clearly communicated to all relevant stakeholders.
- Only a very limited number of QAA Agencies have a practical experience with the EA and a few countries are leading the EA implementation.
- Procedures tend to be nationally centred: Some EMJMDs which already applied for the EA indicated that the experts' panel and the whole procedure were dominated by the country where the QAA Agency was based. Some EMJMDs pointed out linguistic challenges linked to the diversity of the consortium.

Proposals for follow-up

- Participants expressed the need for the European Commission to take the lead and make QAA Agencies and Erasmus+ National Agencies aware of the EA.
- Moreover, Erasmus+ National Agencies, HEIs and National Authorities need targeted information and support for the implementation of the EA, e.g. toolkits. Ideally, key contact persons should be available to guide interested EMJMD on the EA.
- A platform involving all stakeholders and occasions to share good practices are needed. For instance, a database of the national organisations which undergo the EA application process could be useful.
- Participants expressed the wish for incentives/support mechanisms (e.g. a "light version" of the EA procedure for EMJMDs which went through the EMJMD selection process already; contribution to payment of EA accreditation costs).
- Further exploit the results of ongoing projects related to the EA, e.g. IMPEA project.

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