

Quality assurance of joint programmes – a global challenge and possible responses

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Sub-theme 3: Ensuring and promoting trust in a globalized context

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Abstract:

The paper discusses the globally raising problem of quality assurance of joint programmes. These highly innovative and international educational opportunities need to struggle with a number of quality assurance related problems. The paper presents two initiatives aimed to tackle them and thus contribute to the global cooperation among higher education institutions in joint design and delivery of study programmes – the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) developed the Multilateral Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results regarding Joint Programmes (MULTRA) and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. The former aims to strengthen the trust among quality assurance agencies – signatory of the MULTRA.

The second part of the paper describes the experience of practical use of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes gained through the ImpEA project.

The paper concludes with the global opportunities for using both tools to boost trust in quality assurance and among higher education institutions.

Introduction

Joint programmes are set up to enhance the mobility of students and staff, to facilitate mutual learning and cooperation opportunities and to create programmes of excellence. While there has been a political will in many countries, and interest from institutions to create joint programmes, it is well known that they are complicated and labourious to manage. Not least because of the complexity in satisfying the different (and potentially incompatible) quality assurance requirements in the different countries of the participating institutions. Additionally, the different national quality assurance procedures applying to a single joint programme have tended to look only at the part of the programme delivered in a given country, failing thus to fully embrace and evaluate the entirety of the programmes, i.e. bringing forth the value of its “jointness”. The main aim of this paper is to outline possible trust-based ways forward to strengthen global cooperation among higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. It includes two recent developments in this area: MULTRA agreement and the European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

The joint programmes landscape

The European Commission estimates that there are approximately 4000 joint study programmes offered by the higher education institutions of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The total global number remains unknown.

These specific, highly advanced study programmes are usually developed in close, joint cooperation among higher education institutions. They are defined as an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions and leading to a double/multiple or joint degree¹. However, a significant number of those programmes are delivered not only by the European higher education institutions, but also by their partners from all over the world. That means that the more internationally diverse programme partnership the more complicated quality assurance becomes.

The programme consortium needs to satisfy multiple, overlapping or even mutually exclusive national accreditation requirements². Moreover, due to those differences, the higher education

¹ <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/definitions/>

² Blanc de la Carrere, T., Frederiks, M. *Single Accreditation of Joint Programmes: Pilots Evaluation Report*, ECA OCCASIONAL PAPER, European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education, 2013

institutions usually were usually not able to have the accreditation decision issued in one country recognised in another.

The European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) recognised the problem of quality assurance of joint programmes and worked over the years to develop a solution for it. In 2010 ECA members launched the Multilateral Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results regarding Joint Programmes (MULTRA³). With MULTRA multiple procedures can be replaced by one single procedure. The MULTRA stands for a high level of trust between accreditation agencies. This trust between the partners is based on evidence gained through intense cooperation and observations of procedures amongst the MULTRA agencies.

MULTRA and the following ECA project JOQAR⁴ (Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded) were one of the key milestones to the newest achievement in the area of accreditation of joint programmes. The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (European Approach), approved by the Bologna Follow-Up Group in October 2014 and adopted by the EHEA Ministers in their conference in Yerevan, in May 2015, was set up to address these issues and to provide a common framework for the external quality assurance of such programmes. However, the practical application of the European Approach still needs to face some challenges. Therefore, Polish Accreditation Committee established a very strong consortium and successfully applied for the Erasmus+ project ImpEA⁵ (Facilitating Implementation of the European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes). In the following paper, the practical use of the European Approach will be pictured through the lenses of the ImpEA project.

The European Consortium for Accreditation for higher education (ECA) and the Multilateral Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results regarding Joint Programmes (MULTRA)

The European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) is an association of recognised accreditation and quality assurance agencies in Europe. The vision of ECA is to act as an internationally acknowledged driver of innovation in accreditation and quality

³ <http://ecahe.eu/home/about/eca-documents/mutual-recognition-agreements/>

⁴ http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/JOQAR_2010-2013

⁵ www.impea.online

assurance in higher education. With its expertise, networking and services ECA contributes to the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), promotes internationalisation of higher education and “state of the art” activities of its members. ECA was founded in 2003 with the primary aim of mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions.

The objectives of the Association are:

- to achieve mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions, to enhance the conditions for such mutual recognition, especially- for joint programmes;
- to provide a platform for mutual learning and disseminating experiences with accreditation and accreditation-like practises;
- to provide transparent information on quality; and
- to facilitate the internationalisation of institutions and students.

The rationale of the development of different tools to promote mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions was that the ratification of the Lisbon recognition convention (1999) did not solve all recognition problems. The reality was, and in some cases still is, that institutions faced case to case decisions, and it was quite clear that mutually validated information about quality might facilitate recognition work. ECA concluded that mutual recognition agreements would simplify accreditation and recognition of joint programmes and mutual recognition initiatives would contribute to international convergence of external quality assurance. In addition, at the Bologna Ministers Conference, (Bergen, 2005) it was stated: “We underline the importance of cooperation between nationally recognised agencies with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions”.

With the objective of mutual recognition in mind, ECA started developing different activities and tools (Figure 1) with the purpose to:

- reduce existing barriers in recognition of foreign qualifications;
- enhance academic and professional mobility;
- increase transparency in higher education and
- give an opportunity for quality assurance agencies to learn from experiences and good practices of other agencies.

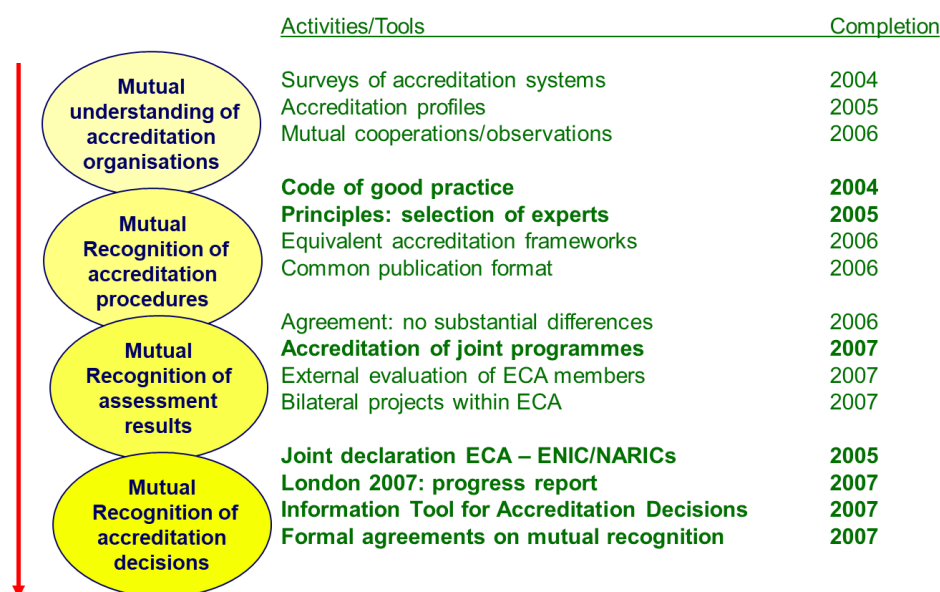


Figure 1. ECA's road map for mutual recognition.

This trust building process delivered a series of documents to increase mutual trust and transparency which would eventually facilitate mutual recognition of accreditation results and decisions:

- Code of Good Practice (2004). The Code of Good Practice lays down a set of standards and good practices regarding the member accreditation organisations of ECA. The Code additionally serves to support the internal quality assurance policies of ECA's members.
- Principles for the Selection of Experts (2005). The selection of external experts is of key importance for any external quality assurance procedure. ECA members have agreed on a set of principles. These encompass among others the rules and regulations of the member agencies; transparency; authority; independence; confidentiality and objectivity.
- Joint Declaration concerning the Automatic Recognition of Qualifications (2005). This Declaration is also called the Vienna Sententia. Members of ECA and the corresponding ENIC-NARICs of their countries signed this document in 2005. In it they lay down the preconditions that have to be met to start recognising each other's qualifications automatically.

- Principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes (2007). In order to increase mutual trust and transparency, the members of ECA have agreed on the following principles regarding accreditation procedures for joint programmes.
- Principles regarding learning outcomes in accreditation procedures (2009). The members of ECA agree that learning outcomes have to be taken into account during any assessment procedure in higher education. This contributes to the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. In order to increase mutual trust and transparency, the members of ECA concur that accreditation procedures should take into account an agreed set of principles.
- Recommendations for mutual recognition of institutional evaluations (2009). In June 2009 ECA members agreed on a set of recommendations for agencies with a view to the enhancement of mutual recognition of institutional evaluations (accreditations, audits or assessments).

Based on the previous experiences which were built in mutual trust and transparency, on 14 December 2010 ECA members launched the Multilateral Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results regarding Joint Programmes (MULTRA). The purpose of the Multilateral Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results regarding Joint Programmes (MULTRA) is to simplify the accreditation and recognition of joint programmes and degrees awarded and to provide an efficient way to expand mutual recognition to more European Higher Education Area countries. It enables joint programmes to be assessed by one quality assurance/accreditation agency but receive relevant legal outcomes, such as accreditation decisions, in all the relevant higher education systems. Before the launch of MULTRA in December 2010 twelve bilateral mutual recognition agreements between ECA members have been signed during the ECA conference in Barcelona in December 2007.

In order to join the MULTRA, there is an admission and observation procedure which is based on the fundament of mutual trust within ECA (Figure 2).

Fundament of Mutual Trust ECA

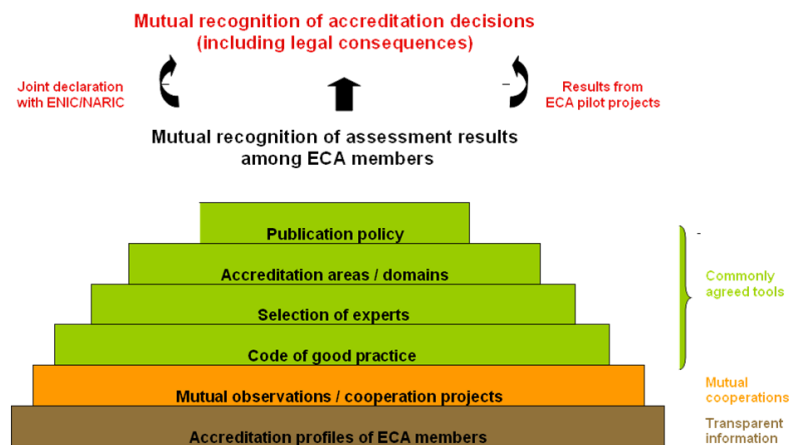


Figure 2. ECA's fundament of mutual trust.

The admission procedure establishes that the interested agency must have a recent (not older than 5 years) external evaluation against the ESG, the ECA Code of Good Practice or against a set of standards that can be considered as equivalent. If this requirement is met, then ECA nominates two observers (who are members of a MULTRA agency) to carry out an on-site-observation. One observer should join a site-visit of a programme accreditation procedure, the other one should get evidence of the accreditation practice through discussions with the agency's representatives. The observers use an observation format and should conclude their report with a recommendation. The observation report covers the following topics:

- Framework of the procedure
 - Structure of the accreditation framework (regulations...)
 - Accreditation standards
 - Additional requirements for the assessment of joint programmes
 - Focus of the accreditation procedure (e.g. input factors, internal quality assurance ...)
 - Assessment of achievement of learning outcomes
 - Enhancement strategies for institutions
 - Responsibility for accreditation procedures
 - Steps in the accreditation procedure
 - Assessment rules and decision scale when accreditation is granted (e.g. excellent, insufficient; conditions, ...)
 - Decision-making process of the agency (rules and responsibility)
 - Period of accreditation

- Appeal system
- Publication policy
- Average number of procedures per year
- Site visit
 - The expert panel
 - The procedure
 - Learning outcomes
 - Self-documentation/-evaluation by the higher education institution and external review
 - Independence and competence of the external panels
 - Enhancement led reviews
 - Publicity of quality standards and criteria (aligned with international standards)

ECA formally checks the observation report and forwards the report including a decision proposal to the MULTRA members who have to approve the admission. The MULTRA stands for a high level of trust between accreditation agencies. This trust is based on evidence gained through intense cooperation and observations of procedures amongst the MULTRA agencies. The observation is not meant to repeat the external evaluation of an agency, but aims to gain mutual trust through observing accreditation practice. The observation should provide evidence if the accreditation procedures and standards are free of significant differences from those of MULTRA agencies and if the results of accreditation procedures of joint programmes can thus be accepted by MULTRA agencies.

The signing accreditation organisations of the MULTRA agree to regard their accreditation procedures, standards and decisions/results as free of significant differences and confirm that within their competences they accept the decisions/results of the accreditation procedures of the other signing accreditation organisation when accrediting joint programmes; on the condition that the signing agencies continue to exchange information about their accreditation systems on a regular basis. Substantial changes of the accreditation systems should be communicated without delay. The signing accreditation organisations agree to give each other access to all relevant documents relating to the accreditation results. All documents must be treated confidentially until they are published.

The agreement is valid for 3 years. After a re-evaluation of the terms of the agreement it can be extended by consent of all parties. MULTRA was signed by 13 agencies in Austria,

Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands and Flanders, Poland, Slovenia, Spain.

In conclusion, ECA has successfully tested a new methodology to come to mutual recognition agreements. As already mentioned, ECA's approach is based on systematic trust-building between agencies (step by step process involving co-operations on all levels).

Since 2017 ECA has been working on further development and dissemination of the MULTRA agreement. Methods and tools of ECA might also be useful for other accreditation and quality assurance agencies and the first steps are already been made as the collaboration in the INQAAHE funded project "Comparisons of QA systems, Review standards and Procedures, and Transparency in Taiwan and Indonesia: Capacity Building for Mutual Recognition at Joint/double degree Programs" sharing the experience gained during this process.

The European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and the ImpEA project

The European Approach provides a set of standards based on the agreed tools of the European Higher Education Area:

- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA⁶ (ESG 2015),
- Qualifications Framework - EHEA,
- European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS⁷)

Based on these tools it proposes a review methodology, which is in compliance with the ESG 2015. It facilitates an integrated approach that can genuinely reflect the joint character of the programmes, taking them as a whole, and addressing quality issues typical and often specific for joint programmes (e.g. consortium agreements, student support for mobility etc.). Consequently, the European Approach is intended to allow a programme consortium to engage in one single quality assurance or accreditation procedure, based on one set of standards, without consideration of additional national standards. The programme consortium should be able to choose any available agency (from one of the participating countries or from a third country) registered in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) to carry out the procedure. When properly implemented and recognised across the EHEA, the use of the

⁶ <https://enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/>

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en

European Approach is expected to significantly reduce the administrative burden for external quality assurance of joint programmes making them thus a more interesting and manageable form of international cooperation for European higher education institutions.

The European Approach is composed of a set of standards and related guidelines covering the following areas:

- eligibility;
- learning outcomes;
- study programme;
- admission and recognition;
- learning, teaching and assessment;
- student support; resources;
- transparency and documentation;
- quality assurance.

The European Approach document also outlines a procedure for the external evaluation of joint programmes. The model follows a typical external quality assurance process, as also described in the ESG, composed of a self-assessment; a peer-review (with a site visit); a report and its publication; and adequate follow-up. It also covers possible decision making procedures and a system of appeals.

“Facilitating implementation of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (ImpEA)” is the Erasmus+ funded project aimed to support efficient implementation of the European Approach.

The project is carried out by the consortium of the following partners:

- Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA, Poland) – project leader
- European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA)
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)
- Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes (AQAS, Germany)
- Agencia de Calidad del Sistema Universitario Vasco (Unibasq, Basque Country, Spain)
- Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland)
- The University of Deusto (Basque Country, Spain)
- Warsaw School of Tourism and Hospitality Management (Poland)
- The Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg (Germany)

- European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)

In order to obtain a better view of the situation in relation to the use of the European Approach, including real and perceived main challenges and difficulties in its use, the ImpEA project launched a survey in early 2018, addressing principally higher education institutions (and joint programmes), as well as quality assurance agencies⁸. The survey gathered 46 responses from quality assurance agencies and 198 responses from higher education institutions.

Most of the participants from the higher education institutions are currently either a coordinator or a partner in at least one joint programme consortium. It is also worth noticing, that almost 20% of the respondents are not currently providing any joint programmes, but they do consider developing or joining them in the future.

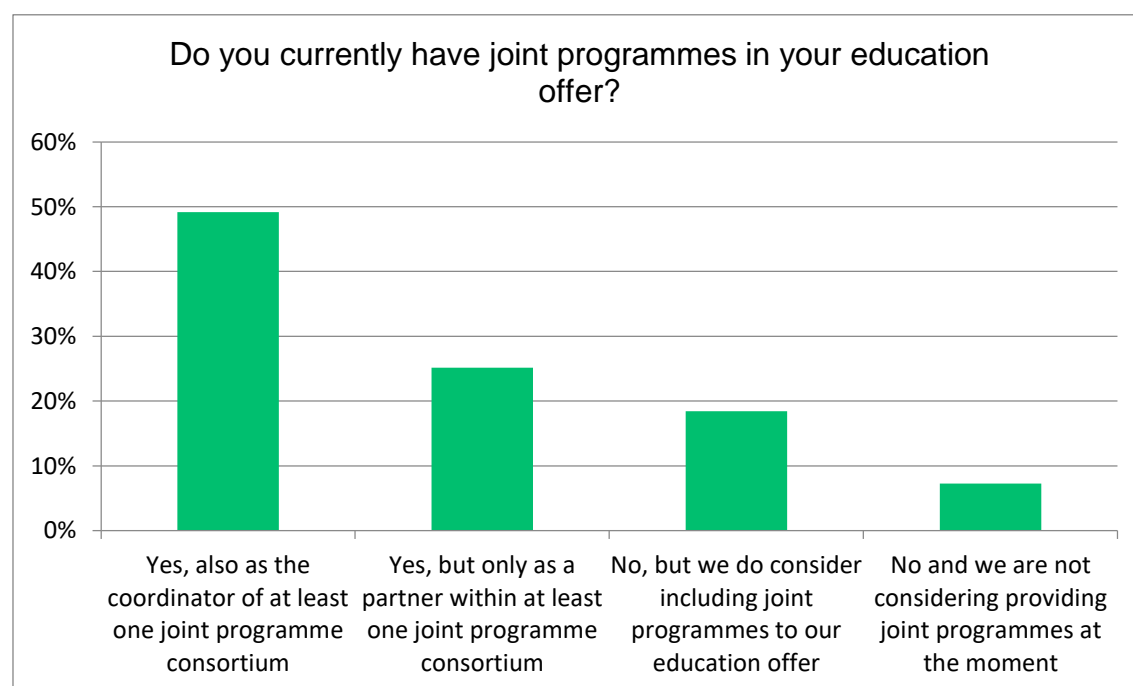


Figure 3. ImpEA project survey results – higher education institutions

Added value of the European Approach

The European Approach was adopted based on a number of benefits it was expected to bring. Among these, specifically the ability of the Approach to evaluate the “jointness” of the programme and thus its specific character and added value; and to facilitate and rationalise the

⁸ Kelo, M., Fernandez de Labastida, E., Frederiks, M., Heinze, R., Markowski, M. *Implementing the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. Background report*. Brussels, 2018. Full text available: <http://impea.online/the-first-project-report-released/>

quality assurance processes making them less laboursome for higher education institutions. This latter was expected to encourage institutions to engage in more joint programmes by reducing the “red tape” attached.

To get a better understanding whether these expectations have been realised in practice, the survey asked the respondents to indicate what they saw as the main benefits of the European Approach. The most important ones are:

- The European Approach facilitates **integrated approaches** to QA of joint programmes
- External QA of joint programmes according to the European Approach **reflects their joint character**
- The European Approach **eases development of joint programmes** by setting agreed standards and tools
- The European Approach is **useful for internal QA** of joint programmes (respondents from HEIs only)

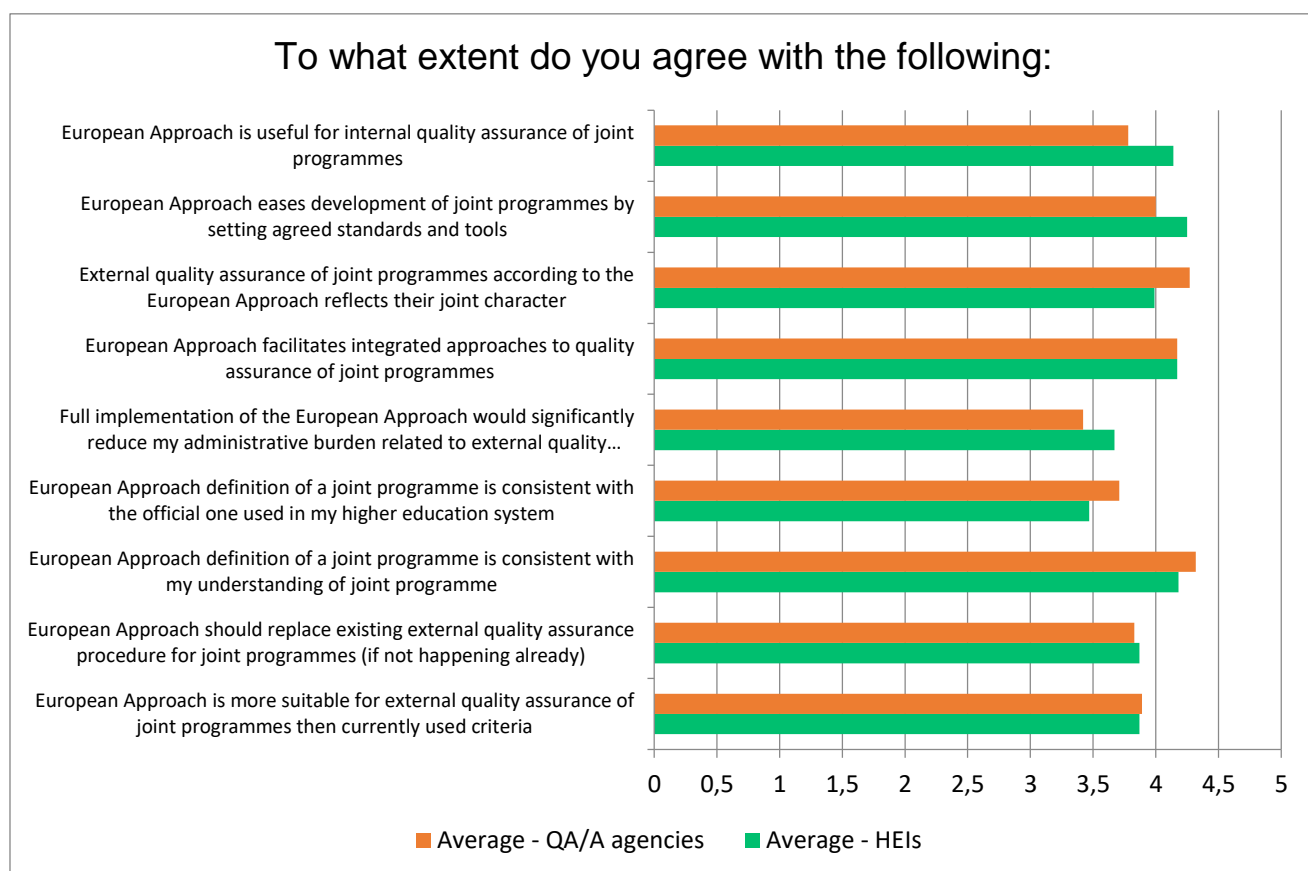


Figure 4. ImpEA project survey results – perception of the added value of the European Approach

The ImpEA project includes four accreditation procedures based on the European Approach framework. On the current stage of project implementation, two of them have been successfully completed and two are in the final phase.

During the process of preparations for those procedures, some key issues were identified which require extensive cooperation and trust between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. These are:

- Joint decision on the accreditation agency's selection
- Synchronized planning and timing of the accreditation procedure, in particular regarding self-evaluation report development, site visit organization and recognition of the final decision
- Focus on the jointness aspects of the programme – the European Approach focuses mainly on the added value coming from the joint design, delivery and internal quality assurance of the programme
- Recognising and highlighting the role and added value of each of the programme consortium partners and its impact on the quality of the programme
- Cooperating prior and during the site visit – which includes timely delivery of all necessary students' and programme documents, availability of the faculty, staff and students during the site visit for physical and online meetings and overall support in the process

Moreover, the ImpEA project procedures show also important lessons learnt for the trust building among quality assurance agencies in the following areas:

- Joint training of the panel experts – including development of the training methodology and deliver a training in a multinational and multicultural environment
- Selecting and working in a multinational panel of experts – inviting and cooperating with foreign experts, representing perspective of at least one other country from the programme consortium
- Information exchange – from the very beginning of the accreditation process, the leading agency needs to be in touch with the partner agencies from other countries of the programme consortium as the open flow of information is of utmost importance for the effectiveness of the procedure
- Recognition of the decision – according to the European Approach, the accreditation decision should be recognized by all involved EHEA countries without any additional

requirements or criteria; this level of trust is possible based on the accountability and credibility of the agencies achieved through the EQAR registration procedure.

The experience gained through the ImpEA project indicate that there is a clear potential for scaling up of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. It is based on the very generic and shared values and principles of external quality assurance and thus, can be used globally. The practical implementation of the European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes requires however a significant amount of trust. It is necessary not only for successful completion of a single accreditation procedure, which then eases and strengthens the cooperation among higher education institutions. But is also requires the strong policy-level support on the national and international levels, to overcome natural barriers coming from different cultures, legal frameworks, habits and practise. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of the European Approach through the ImpEA project show that this is an effort worth taking as it brings very tangible added value for all the parties directly involved in delivery of joint programmes.

Discussion and ways forward

ECA's MULTRA has proven to be an effective methodology for cooperation among quality assurance agencies on recognition of their decision regarding joint programmes. Additionally, there are some lessons learnt—even if currently we know that there is a need to review the MULTRA agreement to adapt it to the new circumstances in Europe as it is the implementation of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. These lessons can be summarized as:

- Trust building process has increased mutual understanding among ECA members and was perceived to be a valuable learning experience;
- It is important to acknowledge and accept the existence of different legal prerequisites for accreditation; and
- The combination of formal agreements and practical co-operation projects has been particularly useful.

Current and early-stage results of the ImpEA project show a significant potential of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. Full implementation of the latter brings closer not only the involved quality assurance agencies but also higher education institutions. Therefore, internal and external quality assurance can work in synergy based on

the joint framework and methodology widely recognized in the European Higher Education Area.

Nevertheless, as it was indicated in the introduction to this paper, the joint programmes know no country or continental boundaries and become more and more global. Therefore, the need for more global cooperation on quality assurance of joint programmes becomes a necessity.

Based on the experience of the ECA MULTRA initiative and the ImpEA project we can draw some ways forward for further consideration. These could be:

- Continuing in the mutual recognition of quality assurance results/decisions using MULTRA methodology as an initial stage of the global cooperation for facing the global challenge of joint programmes;
- exchange of information on changes in accreditation systems via structured quality assurance and accreditation networks;
- stimulate higher education institutions and recognition authorities to make use of mutual recognition;
- cooperation/integration of professional “quality labels”; and
- the development of intercontinental mutual recognition based on scaled-up European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and the experience and outcomes of the ImpEA project.

These ways forward might become a starting point for global discussion on the quality assurance of joint programmes, fostering global trust among key stakeholders. However, the next steps should also take into consideration the new challenges, coming from the much more complexity of the global higher education and quality assurance landscape.

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