Thematic Preparatory Note: European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

The current thematic preparatory note is intended to support the discussions within a Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on the implementation of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (European Approach). The PLA is organised as part of the IMINQA project in the framework of the Thematic Peer Group on QA of the Bologna Follow-Up Group.

In the current analysis a detailed overview of the current status quo of countries' implementation efforts regarding the European Approach is provided. The analysis also delves into the various national and institutional challenges as well as the complexities and opportunities associated with implementing the European Approach across diverse national and institutional contexts.

Sources for the analysis:

The primary source of information for the analysis is the data stored in the Database for External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR)[1]. First, information on the requirements in the different national systems was gathered from the Knowledge Base section. Second, data on the 24 reports covering joint programmes was extracted from the Database section. To this, seven additional reports on joint programmes reviewed with the European Approach have been added as well, to ensure a more comprehensive approach to the analysis. The seven additional reports are expected to be published by NVAO (Netherlands), VLUHR QA and ZeVA on DEQAR in the foreseeable future.

Background information

In the Bucharest Communiqué (April 2012), ministers agreed to allow EQAR-registered agencies to operate across the EHEA while complying with national requirements. They further aimed to recognise quality assurance decisions for joint and double degree programmes and encouraged the development of joint programmes within the EHEA framework.

This aim became operationalised with the development of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes that was adopted by the EHEA ministers at their conference in Yerevan, in May 2015.

The European Approach is meant to address the challenges posed by specific national criteria and varying accreditation processes in European higher education. Multiple administrative procedures, clashing criteria and differing accreditation periods create uncertainty and potential conflicting decisions, making quality assurance, and thus the planning and organisation of such joint programmes difficult.

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1 A number of reports have been directly retrieved from either the agencies themselves or their website. EQAR has contacted these agencies, and they are currently in the process of publishing the results of joint programmes procedures with the European Approach into DEQAR.

About the European Approach

The European Approach comprises of two primary elements i.e., a set of standards and an established procedure[2]. The standards closely align with Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for the Quality Assurance of the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and incorporate agreed EHEA tools, particularly the EHEA's Qualifications Framework (QF-EHEA) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The objective is that the European Approach should be implemented as it is, without any additional (national) criteria or steps in the procedures.

The agreed procedure can be used by any EQAR-registered QA agency whenever at least one consortium partner requires external programme accreditation. In cases where all participating institutions are "self-accrediting" and only need external QA at institutional level, they may opt to use the standards of the European Approach within their internal QA arrangements.

Topic 1. Changes in legal frameworks to accommodate the European Approach

Despite the availability of numerous EQAR-registered QA agencies prepared to implement the European Approach (see more under Topic 3), its full utilisation is still hindered by various national regulations. EQAR's Knowledge Base[3] (consulted 29 August 2023) shows that, merely 20[4] out of the 49 EHEA member countries have fully embraced the European Approach for all higher education institutions (see Map 2). These also include several countries where quality assurance is primarily undertaken at institutional level (Armenia, Finland, UK Scotland, UK England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and Switzerland) and therefore the use of the European Approach is not impeded by legal frameworks.

11 more countries allow the European Approach to be employed, albeit only for certain institutions or under specific conditions, as for example:

- In Estonia, the use of the European Approach is possible if the joint programme has previously undergone an assessment by an EQAR registered agency and the other higher education partners have the right to provide instruction in the corresponding study programme group and academic cycle. EKKA, the Estonian national QA body will assess whether the eligibility criteria are met and that no substantial shortcomings have been identified in the assessment report.

- In Georgia, the draft agreement of institutions implementing the joint higher educational programme has to be 'pre-approved' by the national QA body NCEQE who will check the content and implementation of the joint

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2 See https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/ for the full text.

3 EQAR's Knowledge Base provides an updated overview of all EHEA members countries legal framework and fulfilment of QA commitments. Information is collected and updated from each member state https://www.eqar.eu/kb/country-information/

4 The counting follows the current list of 49 EHEA full members, thus the above figures include Belgium - Flemish Community, Belgium – French Community, United Kingdom and United Kingdom Scotland. https://ehea.info/page-full_members

programme, including whether the rules for awarding a joint academic degree and enrolment regulations are met.

- In Greece, joint programmes offered by Greek higher education institutions participating within the European University Alliance are expected to be reviewed following the European Approach, without any additional national criteria. Institutions that are not members of a European University Alliance are however required to undergo the regular programme accreditation for any joint programmes they may offer.

In the remaining 18 countries, the use of the European Approach is not possible (see countries with light blue in Map 1) as a replacement of compulsory national or regional processes.
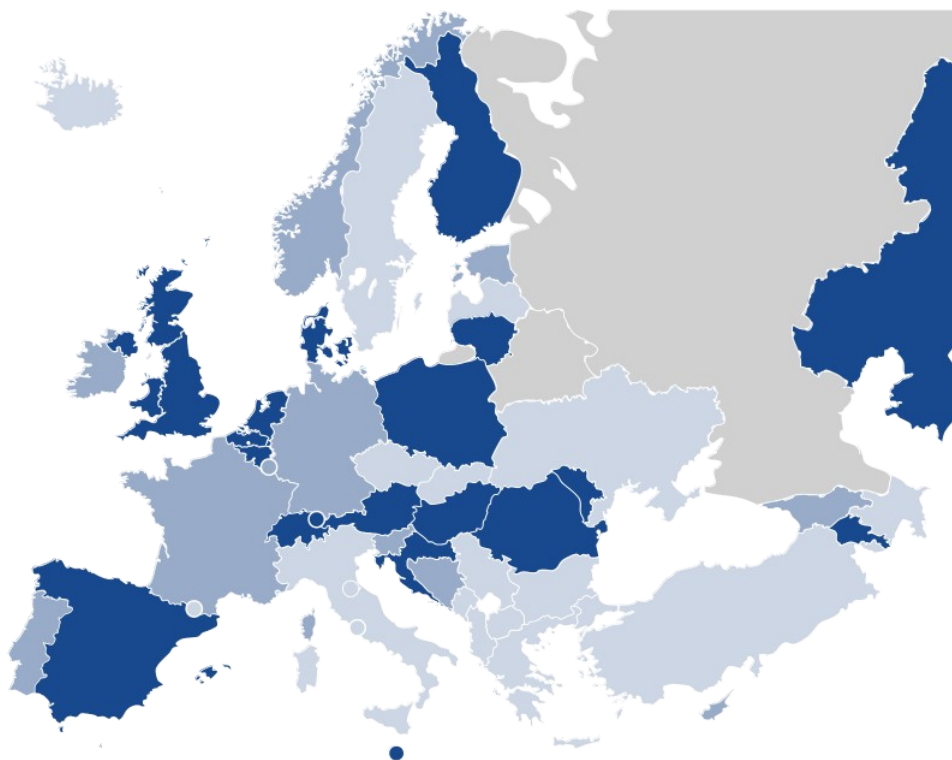
Map 2. HE systems where the European Approach for the QA of JP can be used according to the legal framework i.e., by all HEIs (dark blue), by some HEIs or can be used with conditions (medium blue) or by none of the HEIs (light blue).

Since the adoption of the European Approach in 2015, at least 13 higher education systems that have a requirement for programme level accreditation (Austria, Belgium Flemish Community, Belgium French Community, Croatia, Estonia, France, Germany, Malta, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain) have amended their legislation to permit the use of the European Approach by some or all of their higher education institutions.

Although some progress is evident, significant advancements have yet to materialise, as the number of external QA procedures using the European Approach remains quite low. DEQAR data shows that since the European Approach was introduced in 2015, there has been a minor increase in the number of procedures notably in recent years (see Table 1). As more systems move towards

institutional level external QA this might impact the pace of increase of joint programme procedures (though this might be only a small mitigating factor).

The European Approach was generally employed for two thirds of the total number of international joint programme procedures carried out between 2016 and 2022. To note that in some higher education systems, a large number of joint programmes are developed between higher education institutions within the same country such as in Austria, Belgium-French Community and Germany, thus there was no need to employ the European Approach. The number of joint national programmes may however indicate an openness within the system for such cross-institutional cooperation. It remains to be seen if such collaborations are to extend beyond the borders of the national higher education system.

Year	No of EA procedures	No. of international joint programme procedures (including EA)	No of national joint programme procedures
2016	1	2	5
2017	2	6	5
2018	3	3	7
2019	6	13	10
2020	2	2	27
2021	6	9	16
2022	6	6	5
2023/08	5	5	0
Total	31	46	75

Table 1. Number of EA procedures of the total JP carried out within a year (DEQAR data, including 10 reports not yet uploaded, or wrongly labelled in DEQAR, August 2023)

Considering the uptake of the European Approach within different higher education systems, the DEQAR mapping (see Table 2) shows that the European Approach procedures have been most often employed by higher education institutions within countries where the legal framework makes it possible to replace a national procedure by the European Approach i.e., France (13 HEIs), Germany (12 HEIs), Spain (11 HEIs), Netherlands (6 HEIs), Portugal (5 HEIs), Austria and Belgium – Flemish Community (each 4 HEIs).

While institutions in countries where the legal framework does not recognise the use of the European Approach (see light blue column in Table 2), institutions might nevertheless be able to employ this procedure on an individual, case-by-case agreement with their government or national quality assurance agency. However, such arrangements are exceptional, and do not indicate an openness of the legal framework.

While there are no incentives or mandate for the use of the European Approach for higher education institutions that have no requirement for external programme

accreditation, DEQAR data shows that this approach (see Finland and UK) has been successfully employed through their internal quality management system.

EQAR Knowledge Base Legal framework avail-ability of the EA	Country	DEQAR data No. of HEIs with JP reviews	DEQAR data No. of HEIs using EA	No of HEIs in the country
EA not available	Albania	2	1	4
EA not available	Andorra	0	0	0
EA not available	Azerbaijan	3	0	no data
EA not available	Bulgaria	No data	0	49
EA not available	Czech Republic	3	2	11
EA not available	Holy See	No data	0	no data
EA not available	Iceland	No data	0	1
EA not available	Italy	7	4	17
EA not available	Latvia	0	0	37
EA not available	Montenegro	No data	0	7
EA not available	North Macedonia	No data	1	6
EA not available	San Marino	0	0	no data
EA not available	Serbia	1	1	2
EA not available	Slovakia	No data	0	2
EA not available	Sweden	3	2	39
EA not available	Turkey	0	0	46
EA not available	Ukraine	0	0	17
Available except for double or multiple de-grees	Germany	46	12	417
Available only for some HEIs	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2	1	4
Available only for some HEIs	Cyprus	6	0	41
Available only for some HEIs	Greece	6	1	12
Available only for some HEIs	Ireland	2	2	3
Available only for some HEIs	Luxembourg	0	0	3
Available only for some HEIs	Norway	3	3	42
Available with condi-tions	Estonia	2	1	17
Available with condi-tions	France	22	13	331
Available with condi-tions	Georgia	8	0	60
Available with condi-tions	Portugal	6	5	98
Available with condi-tions	Slovenia	2	2	45

Full availability	Armenia*	0	0	30
Available only for some HEIs	Austria	11	4	57
Full availability	Belgium/Flemish Community	4	4	37
Full availability	Belgium/French Community	29	2	114
Full availability	Croatia	3	2	124
Full availability	Denmark	2	2	36
Full availability	Finland*	3	1	38
Full availability	Hungary	2	1	63
Full availability	Kazakhstan	0	0	135
Full availability	Liechtenstein	0	0	3
Full availability	Lithuania	2	1	39
Full availability	Malta	1	1	1
Full availability	Moldova	0	0	17
Full availability	Netherlands	8	6	no data
Full availability	Poland	3	3	370
Full availability	Romania	2	2	87
Full availability	Spain	13	11	751
Full availability	Switzerland*	2	0	56
Full availability	UK – England	3	1	73
Full availability	UK – Northern Ireland*	1	0	2
Full availability	UK – Wales*	0	0	18
Full availability	UK – Scotland*	0	0	10

Table 2. Number of joint programme procedures, availability and use of European Approach (DEQAR data, August 2023)

Further question for discussions:

- Is the EA more limited in implementation due to constraints of the legal framework or due to a lack of experience and knowledge?

- What was the incentive for countries to adapt their legislation that would allow higher education institutions to use the EA for the accreditation of their joint programmes?

- What are some actionable recommendations for governments to further ensure the implementation of the EA?

Topic 2. Institutional perspectives on the implementation of the European Approach

Development of joint programmes within EHEA

Traditionally, joint programmes make up a small proportion of study programmes. While there is no systematic collection on the existence of joint programmes across Europe, the Erasmus Mundus catalogue reveals the operation of a total of 188 joint programmes at master level, within 36 of the EHEA member countries[5].

DEQAR data further shows that only 0,18% of all reviewed programmes are joint programmes, and only 6% of the 3835 higher education institutions have undergone one or more joint programme accreditation processes (see Table 3), although the figure might be higher given that not all higher education institutions require programme level accreditation (see also Topic 1).

Following the adoption of the European Approach in 2015, 159 joint programme procedures were carried out, of which only 19% are reports based on the European Approach (DEQAR data, August 2023).

Key Statistics from DEQAR (from 03-2008 until 09-2023) www.deqar.eu		
Total no of QA Reports in DEQAR	90 252	100%
At Institutional level	2934	3,2%
At institutional/programme level	130	0,1%
At Programme level	87135	96%
At Joint Programme level	159	0.18%
No. of HE institutions covered	3835	
Agencies*	50	
*Number of agencies that have at some point uploaded reports in DEQAR		

Table 3. Key statistics generated from DEQAR data (August 2023)

Joint projects such as joint programmes may develop as a result of a previous cooperation between universities and require a diverse range of expertise, in curriculum design, quality assurance, legal frameworks, admissions processes, student guidance, and marketing. The analysis of the 31 consortiums offering joint programmes reveal a wide range of disciplines and a large geographical area, covering 34 higher education systems, of which six countries outside of the EHEA. The size of the consortium offering joint degrees ranges from two cooperating institutions e.g., the Epitech and the Deutsch-Italienischer Masterstudiengang Rechtswissenschaft from Germany and Italy to a joint effort of nine different HE institutions i.e., PoSIG joint programmes.

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5 The ERASMUS+ 2021 report may be consulted at https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ff16650b-7b6e-11ed-9887-01aa75ed71a1

Map 3. Uptake of the European Approach within EHEA (August 2023)

For a full display of each higher education institution consult the map in its dynamic form at: https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/

The consulted review reports of joint programmes (accredited with the EA[6]) show that many of the higher education institutions have a great deal of experience in developing partnerships and setting up international programmes. Administratively such universities may be more used to the legal and regulatory problems expected in the running and offering of a joint programme.

Numerous universities providing joint programmes are members of European University Alliances. These institutions seem to attract more international students compared to higher education institutions that are in not participating in alliances (Bonaccorsi A, ETER 2022). Currently 50 of the 3835 DEQAR listed HEIs belong to alliances that offer or have offered joint programmes within or outside of the alliance (ETER data, August 2023).

Over half of the 31 jointly designed study programmes reviewed with the European Approach benefit from grants offered through the Erasmus Mundus Master for Joint Programmes. The consulted reports also show that in addition to expertise in the field, review panel members of these joint programmes also have been or are

6 The 22 published EA accreditation reports (as of August 2023) can be consulted here
https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/european-approach-cases/

involved in European programmes i.e., most students involved in the process are enrolled in joint (Erasmus Mundus) programmes themselves.

Use of the European Approach by HE institutions

To date, 31 procedures with the European Approach have been carried out (counting reports already in DEQAR and the forthcoming reports by NVAO-NL, ZeVA and VLUHR QA), ranging from 1 to 6 procedures per year. The small advance (see Table 1) in the number of procedures may be due to a limited familiarity with the European Approach, the practical challenges related to carrying out such a procedure, as well as due to a limited recognition of different higher education systems (see also Table 2).

The results of the analytical report of the IMPEA project (2020)[7] as well as reports of the TPG C group (2019)[8] and self-reported studies[9] indicate concerns linked to the differences in the length of the external QA cycle or validity period; the misalignment of qualifications across different higher education systems; language requirements for the review report and decision in order to conform with national administrative laws; lack of clear and structured guidelines on how to start, continue and end the procedure; discrepancies in how different systems may define joint programmes (and thus the eligibility to use the EA) or differences in the overall purposes of accreditation of joint programmes etc.

The lessons from the use of the European Approach have also unveiled a multitude of commendable practices such as collaborative management and governance frameworks with partner institutions. These frameworks may encompass jointly appointed senior roles, bilateral steering committees, meetings among university leadership, and cooperative working groups, all designed to provide essential support for the running of joint programme procedures.

Additionally, other commendable practices include a focus on the development of streamlined joint strategies to minimise redundant efforts, agreements on core practices for a smooth operation of the internal quality assurance system of the joint programme and agreed communication framework and timeline.

Long-term success necessitates ongoing engagement of stakeholders as programmes lacking broad commitment and management structures tend to be short-lived (Overmann, C., Kuder, M. 2018).

Outcomes of a joint programme accreditation

While generally outcomes of a joint programme accreditation are positive (see Figure 1), they might come with a number of conditional accreditation requirements.

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7 IMPEA Analytical Report, The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint pro-grammes in 2020 http://impea.online/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Analytical-report.pdf
8 Report of the Peer Learning Activity on the European Approach to the accreditation of joint programmes (2019, Limassol)
https://www.ehea.info/Upload/TPG_C_QA_RO_MK_PLA_Report.pdf
9 https://eua.eu/images/PS_B_jef_cox.pdf

The reports that resulted in a positive decision, but with condition, indicate that joint programmes may have some deficiencies related to e.g., effectively integrating elective courses for market relevance, in providing bridging courses for technical subjects before the start of modules, in implementing fair collaborative selection procedures, in ensuring better alignment of the teaching schedule with the aims of the course, in publishing examination regulations for more transparency or in adjusting the curriculum for language proficiency. Such conditional accreditations are not speaking of the European Approach requirements but on the function of any type of joint programme, signalling that the European Approach can be a suitable option to replace national procedures.
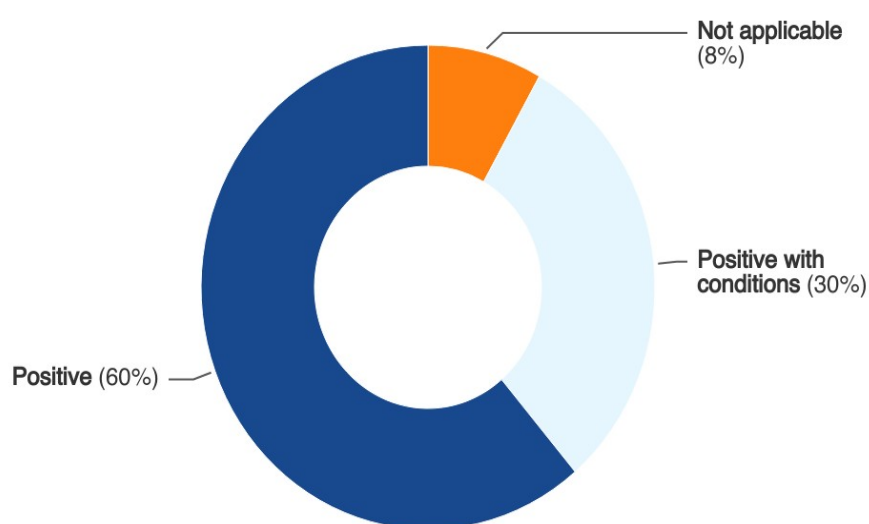

Figure 1: Outcomes of a joint programme accreditation with the European Approach (August 2023)

Further question for discussions:

- What are other main challenges institutions are facing in using the European Approach?

- What are the toolkits, guidelines, templates, webinars, activities and other information that higher education institutions could use to ensure a good experience in the use of the European Approach?

- After the joint programme evaluation (with the EA) is completed, what are the next steps, who is responsible for the follow up?

Topic 3. Agency perspectives on the implementation of the European Approach

Quality assurance of joint programmes

According to the review reports provided by agencies contributing to DEQAR (August 2023), eighteen of 50 quality assurance agencies have reviewed a joint programme at some point. In total, the number of joint programme procedures by EQAR registered agencies is 173. While most joint programmes in DEQAR are of international nature (i.e., between institutions based in different countries), 27% of the joint programmes are implemented by institutions belonging to the same system.

The table below showcases these agencies, the number of reviews that they have performed and the number of joint programmes since their registration on EQAR.

Agency	Number of JP reviews	Number of national JP reviews
ACQUIN (DE)	1	0
AEQES (BE)	55	55
AHPGS (DE)	2	2
AQ Austria (AU)	8	6
AQAS (DE)	7	0
AQU (ES)	2	0
ASHE (HR)	1	0
ASIIN (DE)	65	41
CYQAA (CY)	11	9
EAEVE (AU)	2	0
HCERES (FR)	2	0
NCEQE (GE)	5	5
NVAO (FL)	4	0
NVAO (NL)	5	No data
SQAA (SL)	1	0
Unibasq (ES)	3	0
VLUHR QA (BE)	3	0
ZEvA (DE)	2	0
Total	> 179	> 118

Table 5. EQAR-registered agency's review of joint programmes and of joint programmes with the European Approach

Agencies with the highest number of reviews of joint programmes are based in Germany (ASIIN, AQAS), Belgium (AEQES), Cyprus (CYQAA) and Austria (AQ Austria).

The reports of joint programmes in DEQAR cover 231 HE institutions within EHEA and beyond. Most of the HE institutions carrying out international joint programmes are based in Germany (30 HEIs), France (20 HEIs), Spain (9 HEIs), Austria (8 HEIs), Netherlands and Italy (all with 7 HEIs).

The majority of joint programme procedures are taking place at the level of the second cycle. This may be explained by a preference of setting up joint programmes for a shorter cycle (pragmatic reasoning), but also given the financial incentives supporting such collaborations through the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master grants. Bachelor programmes only account for 16% of the evaluated programmes in DEQAR, while reviews of joint programme at Doctoral level account for 4%.

Implementation of the European Approach

In choosing a QA agency for the review of a joint programme with the European Approach, DEQAR data shows that there is a clear preference for an agency based within one of the countries involved in the programme consortium. Indeed, no consortium chose an agency from a third country.

The uptake of the European Approach has been relatively slow but picking up pace in recent years (see Table 1). Since January 2023[10], three more agencies implemented the European Approach for the QA of joint programmes. While not all registered agencies carry out joint programme level reviews, the data shows that there is further potential for growth in the uptake of the European Approach by quality assurance agencies as only 11 out of 18 QA agencies that carry out joint programme level reviews, have employed the European Approach.

The highest share of joint programme reviews with the European Approach has been carried out by AQAS (7 reviews), NVAO FL & NVAO NL (7) and Unibasq (3). Although the number is relatively low in comparison with the total number of reviews carried out by these agencies, the increase application of the procedure shows a specialisation of these agencies in the use of the European Approach (see Table 3).

Joint programme reviews with the European Approach are mainly intended and carried out within EHEA. DEQAR data shows that the procedure covered higher institutions based in 29 of the EHEA members countries, but also higher education institutions from Kosovo, Israel, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda and United States.

QA agencies carrying out JP	Number of JP evaluated with the EA	Total numbers of reviews of JP (DEQAR data)
ACQUIN (DE)	1	1
AEQES (BE-FR)	0	55
AHPGS (DE)	0	2
AQ Austria	2	8
AQAS (DE)	7	7
AQU (ES)	2	2

10See EQAR's analysis
https://www.ehea.info/Upload/WP6%20IMINQA_DeskResearch_DraftAnalysis.pdf
"Cross-Border Quality Assurance and Quality Assurance of Transnational Education" prepared as part of the IMINQA Project

ASHE (HR)	1	1
ASIIN (DE)	1	65
EAEVE	0	2
HCERES (FR)	2	2
NCEQE (GE)	0	55
NVAO (FL)	3	5
NVAO (NL)	4	No data
SQAA (SI)	0	1
Unibasq (ES)	3	3
ZeVA (DE)	2	No data
VLUHR QA (BE-Fl)	3	3
Total	31	n/a

Table 6: Number of joint programmes evaluated using the European Approach

The European Approach is mostly employed at master level (93% of the EA procedures are at the second cycle) with only two procedures carried out at bachelor level.

DEQAR data also shows that a little over half of the joint programme procedures are voluntary in nature i.e., a review that does not lead to a recognition of the decision as a replacement of the mandatory external QA procedure. DEQAR data cannot however account for situations where there may be recognition within one but not all countries (since the joint programme can only be recorded as either mandatory or voluntary) nor for exceptional situations where the review of a joint programme received a dispensation from the ministry recognising the accreditation with the European Approach.

While the workload created by the European Approach is considered overall comparable or slightly higher than an ordinary joint programme review (ImpEA study 2020), the systematic use of the European Approach for all (non-national) joint programme procedures can depend on several intertwined factors, including:

- limitations in the use of publicly funded staff for additional procedures/ selective activities,

- additional layers and conditions that may complicate the review process,

- adequate information and ease of access to comprehensive and reliable information,

- conflicting criteria and mismatched timelines between national quality assurance and accreditation systems,

- no requirement for joint programme level accreditation.

Further question for discussions:

- Why are not all (non-national) joint programme accreditation procedures carried out following the European Approach?

- What are the main challenges QA agencies are facing in the implementation of the European Approach?

- What lessons can be learned from the implementation of the European Approach by QA agencies?

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Annex: Terminology[11]

Joint programmes typically feature a jointly developed and integrated curriculum and agreed-on credit recognition. Upon completion joint programmes may take the form of double/multiple degrees, joint degrees or joint qualification

Joint degree: A single document awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme and nationally acknowledged as the recognised award of the joint programme

Multiple degree: Separate degrees awarded by higher education institutions offering the joint programme attesting to the successful completion of this programme. (If two degrees are awarded by two institutions, this is a 'double degree').

11Source: https://impea.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/european_approach_background-2015.pdf