

have its characteristics. Therefore, design of index system should tally with the requirement of the area education development and education characteristic in China.

Take the two designs of EDI in India for instance. They have both commonalities with international education index, and obvious characteristics. The same as international organizations, they mostly focus on the education opportunity, teacher resources, education result, and education equity. But they also choose several indicators with Indian characteristics as chief indicators brought into EDI, such as potable water and toilet, class with more than 60 students, educational opportunities for all social classes and tribes, and etc.

In addition, education equity should be paid more attention to, and brought into EDI. It is important that equity is brought into any other index as a chief indicator, with the development of economics, and with the appearance of inequality and the gap between the rich and the poor in social development.

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## **ACCREDITATION OF JOINT STUDY PROGRAMMES: FROM OBSTACLES TO SOLUTIONS (VIEWPOINT OF A EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY)**

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### **Abstract**

*The development of joint programmes offered by at least two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in different countries has received broad support in the context of the Bologna Process, both from politics and academia. European HEIs often regard such study programmes as a central and very promising element of their internationalisation strategies. However, a number of obstacles became visible, which hamper the development of collaborative programmes. One of the crucial challenges is a problem of external quality assurance and accreditation of joint programmes, which is related to the divergences in higher education legislation across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In countries where programme accreditation is obligatory, joint programmes are usually subject to multiple accreditation procedures, which can neglect their joint character and represent an organisational, a bureaucratic as well as a financial burden on the institutions involved. In order to dismantle these obstacles and to ease accreditation of joint programmes, the Eu-*

*ropean Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has been adopted by the ministers of EHEA. Still, only in a few countries HEIs can use this new approach. The latter is now the case in Germany, where FIBAA, a European, internationally oriented accreditation agency, basically operates.*

**Introduction.** The implementation of joint programmes at European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can be essentially viewed in the context of the Bologna Process. The development of study programmes offered by at least two HEIs in different countries, including those awarding joint degrees or double / multiple degrees, has received significant political support among the Member States of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In their Prague Communiqué in 2001, European Ministers in charge of Higher Education have called for increase in the development of “degree curricula offered in partnership by institutions from different countries and leading to a recognized joint degree”. The Ministers regarded these study programmes as a way to promote the European dimensions in Higher Education (EHEA ministers, 2001). From then on, joint programmes became a constant item on the agenda of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and the Ministerial Conferences, since such programmes support various Bologna action lines, such as student mobility, joint curriculum development and joint quality assurance (Erasmus Mundus National Structures, 2015). In the European discourse on higher education, joint programmes are often referred to as a “hallmark of the EHEA”.

Both at the European and national level practical instruments have been introduced to financially support HEIs establishing joint programmes together with their European Union (EU) and non-EU partner institutions. Prominent examples include major support measures like the EU’s Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees and the Integrated International Double Degree Programmes funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The declared goals of these activities are to foster internationalisation in HEIs, to boost the attractiveness of the EHEA as well as to improve the level of competences of graduates and their employability (EACEA, 2017; DAAD, 2011).

A vast majority of countries, participating in EHEA, have reviewed their legislation in order to allow both the establishment of joint programmes and the award of joint degrees (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

Not only in politics, but also at HEIs, interest in collaborative programmes has grown constantly over the past years (De Wit, H., Hunter, F., Howard, L. and Egron-Polak, E., 2015). European HEIs often regard joint programmes as a key element of their internationalisation strategies. In the European Association for International Education (EAIE) Barometer 2014, a survey of 2411 higher education practitioners from EHEA, a majority of respondents indicated that they are currently working on developing joint degree programmes with their institutional partners. 46% of respondents reported a perceived increase in activities related to joint programmes over the past three years (with an additional 7% of those who see even a substantial increase) (European Association for International Education, 2015; Sundback-Lindroos, A., 2016). It is estimated that there are over 3,000 joint programmes in the EHEA (BFUG Expert Group, 2014a). Broadening educational offerings, strengthening research collaboration, advancing internationalisation, and raising international visibility/ prestige are considered to be the top motivations for developing joint or double degree programmes (Obst, D., Kuder, M., Banks, C., 2011).

**Obstacles.** Altogether, there is broad support for joint programmes in political and academic spheres due to numerous advantages to be gained through these programmes. However, a number of obstacles became visible, which hamper the development of collaborative study programmes. Some of these challenges, which are quite wide-ranging, refer to the integration of joint programmes into the institutions (Sursock, A., 2015), or to coordination of cooperation between the partners, or to difficulties in getting access to additional funding on the national level (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). But it soon became clear that the divergences in higher education legislation across Europe are a major barrier to the development of the cross-border programmes. In some countries national legislation allows HEIs to establish joint programmes, but there is no me-

chanism to award joint degrees. Incongruent national legislation can comprise “variable entry points, credit weighting, workloads, learning outcomes” (Davies, H., 2009) and other aspects.

Still, the most frequently mentioned challenge is a problem of external quality assurance and accreditation of joint programmes, which, again, is rooted in the different national legislations in Europe and the still existing heterogeneity of national quality assurance regimes (Aerden, A., Braathen, K. & Frederiks, M. (Eds.), 2010). In more than half of the countries of EHEA, there are problems in recognising quality assurance decisions related to joint programmes. The latest Bologna Implementation Report states, that the development of appropriate quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms has been a major challenge for joint programmes – in large part because the added value and specificity of such programmes may be difficult to assess through typical procedures (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

In practice, this means that in countries where programme accreditation is obligatory and is a prerequisite for the official recognition of degrees, joint programmes are often subject to multiple accreditation procedures. Such procedures are conducted by different quality assurance agencies in countries involved. As at 2011, accreditation of joint or double degree programmes has been predominantly performed in two ways: 1) part A of the joint programme has been accredited in country A, while part B of the programme in country B; or, 2) all parts of the programme have been accredited in both countries (Obst, D., Kuder, M., Banks, C., 2011). Both types of accreditation represent an organisational challenge as well as a bureaucratic and financial burden on the institutions involved. Furthermore, fragmented procedures, where every agency is only looking “at the bits and pieces in “their” country”, neglect the joint character (or “jointness” (European University Association, 2006)) of joint programmes (BFUG Expert Group, 2014b). The sheer amount of often contradictory national requirements, e.g. formal requirements regarding ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) or staff involved in the study programme (BFUG Expert Group, 2014a), makes it even more difficult to accredit cooperative programmes. This issue is sometimes very graphically described as a problem of “too many cooks in the kitchen”.

There is also an option of a joint procedure, where two or more agencies conduct a common accreditation of a joint programme. To be effective, they must agree on a common assessment framework. After that they can jointly employ a panel of experts who will undertake joint site visits at one or more locations as well to prepare a panel report. Joint procedures have the advantage that they look at the entire programme and avoid duplication in national processes. However, they also have their drawbacks. Since there is no standard procedure, agreeing on common assessment criteria ad hoc for nearly every programme, depending on the institutions and countries involved, can be quite time- and resource-consuming for the agencies. Dealing with several accreditation agencies also requires additional effort and expenses on the side of HEIs. Greater challenges arise if the cooperating agencies take different accreditation decisions (BFUG Expert Group, 2014a).

The problem with the accreditation of joint programmes has been identified early after joint degrees were politically prioritized within the EHEA. Already at their Berlin Conference in 2003, ministers have for the first time expressed the political will to actively support the “adequate quality assurance of integrated curricula leading to joint degrees” (EHEA ministers, 2003). It became important to find an effective alternative to current practice in order to facilitate accreditation and recognition of joint programmes. In 2009, the European Commission stated the “need to clarify the portability of national accreditation within the EHEA” and to elaborate clear principles that “might be useful to avoid the need for multiple accreditations” (Commission of the European Communities, 2009). The EU has funded several pilot projects, such as TEAM2 and JOQAR (in both projects FI-BAA was one of the participant accreditation agencies), where quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders have been working together with the aim to develop a European methodology for a single accreditation procedure of joint programmes (Braathen, K., Frederiks, M., Harris, N., 2010; De la Carrere, T. B., Frederiks, M., 2013).

**Solution Options.** An important political step in establishing an alternative to conventional quality assurance of joint programmes was taken in 2012 with the Bucharest Communiqué, in which the ministers of the EHEA member states agreed to allow agencies, which are registered in

the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), “to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements”: “In particular, we will aim to recognise quality assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes. (...) We will examine national rules and practices relating to joint programmes and degrees as a way to dismantle obstacles to cooperation and mobility embedded in national contexts” (EHEA ministers, 2012). The BFUG was mandated to develop a corresponding policy proposal to implement the ministerial decision. This proposal of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and a small ad-hoc expert group, which was commissioned by BFUG, was adopted by EHEA ministers at the 2015 Yerevan Ministerial Conference as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (further referred to as the EA).

The idea of the EA is to ease quality assurance of joint programmes by setting common standards for these programmes that are based on the established tools of the Bologna Process, such as Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) as well as Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), without applying additional national criteria. Thus, the EA puts the quality assurance of joint programmes on a sound European footing, additionally taking into account the distinctive features of joint programmes by specifying the “standard” approach accordingly. If one or more cooperating HEIs require programme accreditation, they should select a suitable quality assurance agency from the list of EQAR-registered agencies to perform one single joint accreditation, which genuinely reflects the joint character of a cross-border study programme. The set of standards defined in the EA can be used both in external quality assurance of joint programmes by agencies as well as in internal quality assurance of these programmes by HEIs. The EA also lays down the procedure principles to be applied for external quality assurance of joint programmes. The EA may be used for joint programmes that are offered by HEIs from both within and outside the EHEA. Involved institutions from non-EHEA countries should then inquire whether their national authorities would accept these standards and recognise the decision of an EQAR-registered agency (BFUG Expert Group, 2014c).

The EA has been approved on the political level of EHEA and received positively by many HEIs and agencies, but it will still take some time before it is going to be implemented on a national level. In many countries, the legal framework will need to be adjusted to recognise external evaluation or accreditation according to the EA (Tück, C., 2016a). Currently, the EA is very unevenly available for the HEIs and agencies from different EHEA countries. In the majority of countries it has yet to be put into practice. Only in a very few countries all HEIs can use the EA to satisfy national requirements. There are also some countries, where it is possible under specific conditions (Tück, C., 2016b). The latter is the case in Germany, where FIBAA basically operates.

### **Outlook**

Originally, the German Accreditation Council (GAC), which is the central body in German accreditation system, recommended nationally recognised agencies to refer to results gained in external quality procedures in other countries and to carry out joint procedures with foreign agencies when it comes to the accreditation of joint programmes (Akkreditierungsrat, 2004). Later the GAC adopted new rules, according to which three types of accreditation procedures of joint programmes have been permitted: 1) accreditation by an agency accredited by the GAC; 2) accreditation by an agency accredited by the GAC together with a foreign agency, and 3) recognition of the accreditation decision of a foreign agency (EQAR-listed or full member of ENQA) by an agency accredited by the GAC. In the first two procedures, the GAC-accredited agency ensures the compliance of the joint programme with the criteria of the GAC and the set of national requirements as defined by the German Kultusministerkonferenz (Conference of Ministers of Education). Still, the GAC may provide for exceptions if there are contradictions between German and foreign regulations (Akkreditierungsrat, 2009). Generally, these rules continue to apply.

In 2015, however, the GAC additionally declared the EA to be immediately applicable. Joint programmes awarding joint degrees, with the participation of at least one German university, can be accredited under the rules of the EA and receive the Quality Seal of the Accreditation Council (Akkreditierungsrat, 2015).

FIBAA considers this development as very positive. The accreditation of joint programmes can in this way be optimized for all participants. As an EQAR-listed agency, which has an excellent pool of foreign experts, and which quality criteria are already ESG-based, FIBAA feels ready for the application of the new approach.

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