

Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded (JOQAR)

DURATION

From November 2010	To	October 2013	Total Months	36
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SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

JOQAR denotes Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded. The overall purpose of the project is to ensure that Erasmus Mundus programmes (and joint programmes in general) are facilitated in two specific areas: accreditation and recognition. The project partnership consequently includes quality assurance/accreditation agencies (QA/A agencies) and recognition bodies (ENIC-NARICs). The external QA and accreditation of joint programmes is a challenge for both joint programmes and QA/A agencies as it normally includes multiple national accreditation procedures. The project instead seeks to promote single accreditation procedures through the following specific objectives:

- *The development of a multilateral recognition agreement regarding QA and accreditation results.* This action line will establish observation missions, including comparisons, between QA/A agencies and build up a transferable methodology in order to include other QA/A agencies into the multilateral agreement after the project has ended.
- *The establishment of a European coordination point for external QA and accreditation of joint programmes.* The coordination point gives coordinators of joint programmes the opportunity to consult this specialised information centre when they need to undergo external quality assurance and/or accreditation of their joint programme. The coordination point additionally provides QA/A agencies with assistance and specialised expertise on accreditation of joint programmes.

There are currently a lot of problems with the recognition of the degrees awarded by joint programmes which the project seeks to solve through the following specific objectives:

- *Awareness-raising among higher education institutions and joint programmes about ENIC-NARICs' expectations regarding joint programmes, the design of the degree they award and the content of the diploma supplement.* This should result in published guidelines and good practices for higher education institutions and their joint programmes.
- *The establishment of a common ground among ENIC-NARICs regarding the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes* should result in agreed principles.
- *Transparent information provision regarding Erasmus Mundus programmes* by including these programmes in the Crossroads database (<http://www.grossroads.eu/>).

The target groups who will benefit from improved accreditation and recognition are joint programmes, ENIC-NARICs, students and QA/A agencies. JOQAR will engage stakeholders in a structured way through a stakeholders group. The project will reach out to the Erasmus Mundus programmes and establish direct ties with the consortia. The results will be disseminated through the networks of the partners and by a variety of means, including a dissemination conference, a knowledge base, publications, a project website, and workshops. The European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) will make sure that the results of the project, such as the coordination point, knowledge base and the methodology applied, are maintained after the end of the project to the benefit of joint programmes provided in Europe and in third countries.

1a) Rationale and background

The European Commission's report on progress in quality assurance in higher education (September 2009) states that "*National quality assurance agencies should be encouraged to develop activities beyond their borders and to seek the recognition of their decisions in other countries, e.g. through conventions of mutual recognition. [...] There may be a need to clarify the portability of national accreditation within the EHEA and also the issue of quality assurance for cross-border higher education within the EHEA. Given the growing importance of joint and double degree courses in Europe, clear principles might be useful to avoid the need for multiple accreditations.*".

The project partners see this project as a direct response to the Commission's report. JOQAR is meant to clarify the issues of quality assurance across borders, specifically relating to joint programmes. The project can build on the experiences that its partners who are members of the European Consortium of Accreditation in higher education (ECA) have gained with the accreditation and recognition of joint programmes through ECA's project TEAM II.

The TEAM II project report on the recognition of qualifications awarded by joint programmes (March 2010) brought to light many issues and problems: "*ENIC-NARICs indicate that the documents they receive, such as the degree, the transcript and/or the diploma supplement, do not provide the information they need about the institutions involved and their role, the programme and its details and the awarded degree(s)*". The workshop, organised as a follow-up to this report, revealed that there is a recognition discrepancy: some criteria are applied differently across Europe. A striking example is the fact that recognition of the joint programme in one or a few of the higher education systems involved might be sufficient for some ENIC-NARICs, while most ENIC-NARICs require the joint programme to be recognised in all the higher education systems concerned. If these issues already arise among European countries that have a relatively good knowledge of each other's systems, there might be an even greater problem when European degrees and diploma supplements are presented for recognition in third countries. As Stephen Hunt (chair of the ENIC network) said during the workshop: "*Based on this documentation (a degree and a supplement awarded by a joint programme, red.), a credential evaluator in Nebraska wouldn't even make the effort to start a recognition procedure*".

The project consortium wants to elaborate on the issues mentioned above and deal with both the institutional and joint programmes perspective and the ENIC-NARIC perspective (and the perspective of credential evaluators in general).

1b) Overall aims and specific objectives

The overall purpose of the project is to ensure that Erasmus Mundus programmes (and joint programmes in general) are facilitated in two specific areas: accreditation and recognition.

There are two aims derived from this:

1. to facilitate single cross-border quality assurance and accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes leading to formal results in different countries.
2. to facilitate the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes.

Both aims have specific objectives linked to them.

The following specific objectives are linked to the first aim:

- the development of a multilateral recognition agreement regarding QA and accreditation results
- the establishment of a European coordination point for external QA and accreditation of joint programmes

The following specific objectives are linked to the second aim:

- awareness-raising among higher education institutions and joint programmes about ENIC-NARICs' expectations regarding joint programmes, the design of the degree they award and the content of the diploma supplement
- the establishment of a common ground among ENIC-NARICs regarding the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes
- transparent information provision regarding Erasmus Mundus programmes via Crossroads.

1c) Target groups

The first target group that benefits from the project are the higher education institutions which provide joint programmes. Currently, these institutions have to undergo multiple national accreditation and QA procedures in the countries where they operate. The establishment of a European coordination point means that they can turn to the coordination point for advice on how their joint programme can be accredited or quality assured through a single procedure. The coordination point can bring agencies together and apply a methodology that enables a single procedure. If agencies have entered into a multilateral recognition agreement it is a lot easier to facilitate that the results of the single accreditation procedure will be accepted in each of the countries that are part of the multilateral agreement. The institutions can also benefit from the project activities which are centered around raising awareness among joint programmes about the expectations that ENIC-NARICs have regarding the delivery of the degree and the content of the diploma supplement. For instance, the signatures on the diplomas (by which institutions and by whom within the institutions); the title of the joint programme and the qualification awarded; and the information on the joint programme which is provided on the diploma and the diploma supplement (and the consistency between the two) are all important elements when assessing qualifications. If institutions know about these expectations then they can take these into account when designing and signing diplomas, and when writing the diploma supplements. This will surely contribute to the recognition of qualifications awarded by joint programmes.

The second target group are the ENIC-NARICs who will be assessing qualifications awarded by joint programmes. For them this is a relatively new, but rapidly increasing part of their work. Not surprisingly with a new phenomenon, they apply different approaches when deciding on the recognition of a qualification awarded by a joint programme. This also reflects the fact that joint programmes operate within the legal context of each of the countries involved. It is therefore tempting for ENIC-NARICs to base their recognition decisions on their own legal system and on their national practises for assessing qualifications. However, specific for joint programmes is that they have to deal with multiple national legal contexts, in some cases also outside of Europe. Joint degrees are particularly challenging as they are on the one hand a joint qualification awarded by the joint programme partner institutions collectively, but on the other hand awarding these joint degrees is based on national legislation of each of the participating countries, and the specificities of the legal base for joint degrees vary among the countries involved. What is needed in this diverse situation is that there is common ground for ENIC-NARICs to base their recognition decisions on. The TEAM II Workshop with ENIC-NARICs in March 2010 has shown that this common ground is only partially being provided by instruments like the recommendation on the recognition of joint degrees from the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee. This project aims to enhance the establishment of a common ground for the recognition of qualification from joint programmes which was endorsed by the representatives of the 20 ENIC-NARICs that were present at the March 2010 Workshop.

The third target group are students who are enrolled at joint programmes. Students will benefit from improved recognition of the qualifications awarded by joint programmes. This should make it easier for them to study and, after they've graduated, to work abroad. Through providing transparent information on Erasmus Mundus programmes in Crossroads they will have access to a lot of information on the quality and recognition of Erasmus Mundus programmes. In addition, the methodology used for the single accreditation procedure of joint programmes will focus on coherent programmes offered at the participating institutions and at achieving learning outcomes at the different locations. So students may expect to gain from the assessments and recommendations made with regard to the joint programmes where they are enrolled if this methodology has been used for quality assuring and accrediting joint programmes.

The fourth target group are other QA and accreditation agencies which are dealing with the accreditation of joint programmes. They will benefit from the methodology and the coordination point for single accreditation of joint programmes, the knowledge base, the pilot procedures and other project activities.

1d) Outputs/products

The following outputs/products are foreseen:

Observation missions, including comparisons, between QA and accreditation agencies

- *Nature:* Observations of accreditation procedures of another agency participating in the project
- *Volume:* 16 observation missions
- *Structure:* The observation missions are carried out by each of the agencies in the project who will observe a procedure of another agency in the project. Each agency will carry out 1 observation mission. An observation format will be drafted which can be used for carrying out the observation. The format relates to standards for good practices in accreditation (the ECA Code of Good Practice) and includes a comparison of accreditation frameworks on some essential points, as well as information on how the achievement of learning outcomes is assessed.
- *Content:* The observation missions consist of: the observation format, the observation of the procedure, and a short observation report based on the format which is made by the observer with comments from the observed agency, and then shared among the project partners.
- *Language:* English

Transferable methodology for including agencies in the multilateral recognition agreement

- *Nature:* An on-line methodological report (in pdf-file ready for print)
- *Volume:* approx. 20 pages
- *Structure:* Introduction; Lessons learnt from the observation missions; The observation format; The content of the multilateral recognition agreement; How to join the multilateral recognition agreement?
- *Content:* The methodological report will look at the experiences from the observation missions which form the basis for the trust needed to join the multilateral recognition agreement. If needed improvements of the observation format or the conduction of the observations will be proposed. This will be followed with the proposal for the content of the multilateral recognition agreement. The final chapter will deal with the steps agencies should take in order to join the multilateral recognition agreement.
- *Language:* English

Feasibility study for the coordination point

- *Nature:* An on-line report (in pdf-file ready for print)
- *Volume:* approx. 30 pages
- *Structure:* Introduction; Results of the on-line survey; Results of input from project groups; Work plan for the coordination point; Conclusions
- *Content:* An on line survey will be held in which coordinators of joint programmes will be asked which information on quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of degrees awarded they would find useful to be provided by the coordination point. The project groups on Accreditation, Recognition, and Stakeholders will be asked similar questions during the project groups meetings. A work plan for setting up and maintaining the coordination point, and applying a methodology for the single accreditation of joint programmes will be drafted. The work plan will contain work flow charts for giving information, providing assistance and coordinating the single accreditation of joint programmes. The feasibility of the work plan will be discussed with the project groups. The work plan will be amended accordingly.
- *Language:* English

Pilot procedures regarding joint programmes

- *Nature:* Single accreditation procedure of joint programmes carried out by at least one of the partner agencies under the guidance of the coordination point, followed by an on-line pilots evaluation report (in pdf-file ready for print).
- *Volume:* 4 pilot procedures and an pilots evaluation report of approx. 20 pages

- *Structure:* 4 joint programmes (if possible Erasmus Mundus programmes) will be selected for carrying out the pilot procedures. One of the procedures should take place outside of Europe. The aim of the pilot procedures is to test the approach taken by the coordination point in accordance with the work flow charts and the methodology for accrediting joint programmes. The pilots evaluation report will consist of: Introduction; Lessons learnt from the pilot procedures; Revision of work flow charts and methodology
- *Content:* In each of the pilot procedures a joint programme will be accredited with the participation of other partner agencies. The pilots evaluation report is meant to refine the methodology and work flow charts of the coordination point.
- *Language:* English

Knowledge base

- *Nature:* Website design with electronic database containing literature and principles on internal and external quality assurance of joint programmes, and information on recognition of degrees awarded from joint programmes.
- *Volume:* 1
- *Structure:* The Knowledge Base will primarily function as a point of reference for coordinators of joint programmes, quality assurance agencies and recognition authorities, but will also contain information which is of value for other Stakeholders in HE. The Knowledge base will be built up throughout the whole project and be officially launched by the end of the project.
- *Content:* At the end of the project the Knowledge base will contain a rich collection on issues related to quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of degrees awarded from joint programmes.
- *Language:* English

Guidelines regarding the award of degrees and diploma supplements for higher education institutions and their joint programmes

- *Nature:* An on-line report (in pdf-file ready for print)
- *Volume:* approx. 20 pages
- *Structure:* Introduction; Methodology applied for establishing guidelines and good practices; Guidelines; Good practices; Conclusions
- *Content:* The draft guidelines and good practices will be discussed in two workshops with ENIC-NARICs and the drafts will be circulated among Erasmus Mundus programmes and the project groups
- *Language:* English

Principles regarding the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes

- *Nature:* An on-line report (in pdf-file ready for print)
- *Volume:* approx. 10 pages
- *Structure:* Introduction; Methodology applied for establishing the principles; The Principles
- *Content:* The draft principles will be discussed in two workshops with ENIC-NARICs and the drafts will be circulated among recognition bodies world-wide, credential evaluators and the project groups
- *Language:* English

ENIC-NARIC Workshops on the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes

- *Nature:* Workshops with ENIC-NARICs
- *Volume:* Two Workshops
- *Structure:* Draft principles, guidelines and good practices to be discussed by ENIC-NARICs
- *Content:* The recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes
- *Language:* English

Joint programmes dissemination conference

- *Nature:* Conference
- *Volume:* One conference
- *Structure:* The results of the JOQAR project will be disseminated through this conference
- *Content:* The target groups for which presentations and sessions will be scheduled are QA and accreditation agencies, institutions providing joint programmes and coordinators of joint programmes, ENIC-NARICs, students and government representatives.
- *Language:* English

Inclusion of Erasmus Mundus programmes into the Crossroads database

- *Nature:* Database development
- *Volume:* One
- *Content:* All the Erasmus Mundus programmes (incl. –where available– learning outcomes) and institutional details will be included into the Crossroads database
- *Language:* English

Search function and dedicated Erasmus Mundus web page on Crossroads

- *Nature:* Database development
- *Volume:* One
- *Content:* Creation of a special search function on Crossroads to find Erasmus Mundus master's programmes and to search through consortium web pages and to link all this information to a dedicated Erasmus Mundus web page on Crossroads
- *Language:* English

1e) Activities and relation to objectives

The project has five action lines which are each related to a specific project objective:

The *first* action line is geared to fulfil the objective of developing a multilateral recognition agreement regarding QA and accreditation results. So far only bilateral mutual recognition agreements between accreditation agencies have been signed. Since joint programmes have a wider scope and involve many different countries, multilateral mutual recognition agreements are necessary. Moreover, most of the project partners have not entered yet into mutual recognition agreements of whatever nature. This action line will establish observation missions, including comparisons, between agencies and build up a transferable methodology with the aim to include both the agencies participating in the project as other agencies into a multilateral agreement after the project has ended.

The *second* action line concerns the establishment of a European coordination point for external QA and accreditation of joint programmes. Here, the project builds upon the experiences in ENQA's TEEP II project and ECA's TEAM projects. These projects pointed out that the organisation of an external QA procedure regarding joint programmes can be quite complicated and expensive and that the agencies involved need very specialised information and expertise. The Coordination point will provide information on internal and external quality assurance of joint programmes and information on recognition of degrees awarded from joint programmes. The coordination point gives coordinators of joint programmes the opportunity to consult this specialised information centre when they need to undergo external quality assurance and/or accreditation of their joint programme. The coordination point additionally provides agencies with assistance and specialised expertise on accreditation of joint programmes. This action line will include a feasibility study, pilot procedures and the launch of a knowledge base..

The Coordination point will also coordinate the accreditation of joint programmes at the request of agencies or institutions providing joint programmes. The Coordination point will not carry out accreditation or QA procedures itself but will bring agencies and institutions together, facilitate in planning the procedure

and provide a specific methodology for carrying out single accreditation procedures. The coordination point can also give advice to agencies and institutions on how single cross-border QA and accreditation procedures of joint programmes can lead to formal results in the different countries.

In the past years the partners that have been cooperating in ECA have been building up expertise and common grounds for accreditation of joint programmes. These experiences will be further developed during the lifetime of the JOQAR project. By the end of year 3 the Coordination point will have been established.

The *third* action line relates to the objective of awareness-raising among higher education institutions and joint programmes about ENIC-NARICs' expectations regarding joint programmes, the design of the degree they award and the content of the diploma supplement. During a workshop (March 2010), ENIC-NARICs discussed examples of actual degrees and Diploma Supplements awarded by joint programmes. This workshop concluded that acceptable practices are rare and best practices even rarer. This action line should consequently result in published guidelines and good practices for higher education institutions and their joint programmes.

The *fourth* action line concerns the establishment of a common ground among ENIC-NARICs regarding the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes. A survey among ENIC-NARICs (November 2009) revealed that there is currently a recognition discrepancy: degrees awarded by joint programmes could be recognised in one country but not in another, creating uncertainty for graduates. This action line should therefore result in agreed principles regarding the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes.

The *fifth* action line concerns transparent information provision regarding these programmes. The survey mentioned above brought to light that ENIC-NARICs need a tremendous amount of information when recognising degrees awarded by joint programmes. This is of course the result of the fact that a degree awarded by, for example, an Erasmus Mundus master's programme is not a simple foreign degree awarded in one specific higher education system. It is also not an entirely foreign degree either if a home institution is involved in the programme. This action line should therefore inform the ENIC-NARICs (and potential students) about all the Erasmus Mundus programmes via Qcrossroads. The project will include all the programmes (incl. –where available– learning outcomes) and institutional details into the database, create a special search function to find Erasmus Mundus master's programmes and to search through consortium web pages and link all this information to a dedicated Erasmus Mundus web page on Qcrossroads.

1f) European and international dimension

The project partners that are members of the European Consortium of Accreditation in higher education (ECA) have gained some experience with the accreditation and recognition of joint programmes through ECA's project TEAM II. However, the TEAM II project highlighted many issues regarding both accreditation and recognition that still need answers. These issues relate e.g. to the creation of an effective and efficient methodology for single accreditation of joint programmes, specifically when there are no mutual recognition agreements between agencies of the countries involved in the joint programme. One approach could be to extend multilateral recognition agreements to as many countries as possible. Another approach could be to develop principles for carrying out single accreditation of joint programmes that agencies of all countries involved could accept. As each approach separately would assume ideal conditions that in practice do not exist (e.g. it is unlikely that all agencies in the world could be included in a multilateral recognition agreement or that all agencies could adhere to principles for the accreditation of joint programmes), a combination of both approaches would increase the likelihood of the results of single accreditation procedures being accepted by most agencies. This is what JOQAR aims for. The project is unique in combining these approaches and in setting up a coordination point for single accreditation of joint programmes. The problems with accreditation of joint programmes in practice are manifold: the cooperating institutions have to gather information on accreditation requirements in each country; they're facing many agencies, different accreditation periods in each country, different accreditation and QA frameworks, specific national (legal) requirements, etc. It's not strange that many joint programmes do not even dare to think of a single accreditation procedure for the whole of the joint programme. A coordination point is very much needed to bring the different actors and interests together, to facilitate a single accreditation procedure and to give information on the possibilities.

With regard to the recognition of qualifications awarded by joint programmes there also needs to be done a lot of work. The TEAM II project showed that there exists a wide diversity in how ENIC-NARICs handle the recognition of these qualifications. A common ground among ENIC-NARICs to assess these qualifications is needed. JOQAR aims to provide that common ground for ENIC-NARICs on the one hand and to raise awareness among institutions about the expectations of ENIC-NARICs regarding (diplomas and diploma supplements) joint programmes on the other hand.

For both aspects, accreditation/QA and recognition, it is clear that this is not only a European view. Joint programmes consortia have partner institutions all over the world. It is also important to note that for these third countries the European regulations that apply to Erasmus Mundus programmes may have links to recognition or accreditation practices that are understandable from a European point of view but may not be in line with national practices elsewhere. The TEAM II Workshop in March 2009 pointed e.g. at some possible problems with recognition of qualifications from Erasmus Mundus programmes in the USA. By involving accreditation agencies from third countries in the project their perspectives on these issues will be included, to the benefit of all. The fact that one of the pilot single accreditation procedures will take place in a third country provides another example of how the international dimension can be brought within the realm of the project and its activities. In sum, JOQAR will not only facilitate the accreditation and recognition of joint programmes in Europe but also those, e.g. Erasmus Mundus programmes, which have partners in third countries.