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Paper

Title: A thematic analysis of European Approach Joint Programme reviews

Abstract

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes was approved by the ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2015. Since then, research on its implementation has primarily focused on legal barriers and challenges posed by national external quality assurance practices. Case studies and examples of promising practice have provided valuable insights into the practical difficulties encountered by QA agencies and higher education institutions during external QA reviews conducted using the European Approach. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the outcomes of these reviews. This paper seeks to address this gap by shifting the focus to the results of these evaluations. In the spirit of ESG 3.4 on thematic analysis, this study systematically compares reports available in English and listed as currently valid in June 2025 on the Database for External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR). The analysis is structured around the standards of the European Approach to identify recurring challenges that joint programmes face in their design, organisation, implementation, and quality assurance. The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview that supports higher education institutions already engaged in joint programmes or planning to launch them. Additionally, it offers insights that may inform the ongoing development of the European Degree (Label) and the revision of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

Introduction

Research and data examining the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, such as outputs of European projects (e.g. Biaggi et al., 2024) or the EQAR knowledge base (2025), have primarily focused on statistics about its uptake by agencies and the possibility to use it as well as persisting legal barriers in the countries of the EHEA. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the outcomes of these reviews regarding the quality of joint programmes that are planned or already implemented by European HEIs.

This paper tries to close this gap, by thematically analysing European Approach review reports in the spirit of ESG 3.4. 43 review reports, available in English and listed as currently valid in June 2025 on the Database for External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), were examined to identify the most common challenges faced by joint programmes. To limit the scope of the research, only standards were considered, for which the panel assessed the criteria as anything less than “fulfilled” or “compliant”, even though many of the reports include recommendation for fulfilled standards as well. This indicates an enhancement-oriented implementation of the European Approach by agencies and review panels. For the sake of clarity, the wording of assessments is harmonised to “fulfilled”, “partially fulfilled” and “not fulfilled”.

Overview of reviewed joint programmes and review outcomes

Of the 43 programmes reviewed, five were joint Bachelor programmes, one of 240 ECTS credits, the others of 180 ECTS credits. Three of those are offered by European University Alliances, two by other consortia of HEIs.

Of the 38 Master programmes, the vast majority (36) consists of 120 ECTS credits, one of 90 and one of 60 ECTS credits. 23 reports on master programmes clearly indicate that the programme is an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master or that it was the outcome of an Erasmus+ Erasmus Mundus Design Measures. For three of those, the reports also indicate that the HEIs offering the programme are connected through a European University Alliance. Of the remaining programmes, eight out of 15, so slightly more than half, reference a European University Alliance as the basis for cooperation. Only five of the Master programmes include partners from outside the EHEA, with one including HEIs from Kosovo and the other four partners from other continents.

Consortium sizes range from two to 13 HEIs, with seven consortia involving more than one HEI from certain countries.

For 21 of the joint programmes the reports clearly state how joint degrees will be awarded, for six programmes awarding joint degrees is implied. Nine programmes award joint degrees with additional degrees from some partners, seven programmes issue multiple degrees.

Out of the 43 programmes, only one received a negative review and accreditation decision, three reviews did not result in a decision by design. Of the 39 accredited programmes, nine programmes were accredited with explicit conditions in decision documents, all of those were master programmes. All five bachelor programmes were accredited without conditions.

Standard 1 Eligibility

Four programmes were assessed as partially fulfilling this standard, while two were assessed as not fulfilling it. Issues in relation to **1.1 Status** were identified in two cases, one not fulfilling the requirements of partners’ recognition as HEIs in their respective national systems. The unclear relationship between a HEI as consortium partner and its faculty implementing the programme in a

national system with highly autonomous faculties was assessed as only partially fulfilling the standard. For **1.2 Joint design and delivery**, one panel saw the necessity of a stronger expression of one HEIs commitment to the programme to be put in writing. **1.3 Cooperation agreement** was found partially fulfilled in two cases, where some specific information was missing from an already signed agreement. Two panels assessed the criteria as not fulfilled based on lack of a signed agreement at the time of the review.

Standard 2 Learning Outcomes

Six out of the 43 programmes were assessed as partially fulfilling the criteria, one as not fulfilling it. For **2.1 Level** one programme did not demonstrate clearly enough the master level of its intended learning outcomes (ILOs), one programme not fulfilling this standard lacked alignment with some of the national qualification frameworks of the partners' systems.

For **2.2 Disciplinary field**, three programmes only fulfilled the standard partially. Concerns here mostly related to general issues, such as lack of certain field specific content and transversal skills deemed necessary by the panel. Other general issues of study programmes found here are related to describing the programme: a need to break down ILOs into operational ILOs, defining how courses and their ILOs contribute to them, and how they are assessed. Harmonisation of these descriptions of ILOs is certainly more challenging in a joint programme and was pointed out in one report, together with the impact of mobility. One panel recommended to explicitly demonstrate how the programme benefits from joint delivery.

Issues identified in relation to the six programmes only partially fulfilling **2.3 Achievement** are exclusively such that might also be found in programmes offered by one HEI only: lack of information about how ILOs are going to be achieved or descriptions of measures to ensure they are achieved. In some ex-ante reviews, review panels assessed the situation on paper as satisfying but explicitly refrained from fully assessing achievement.

None of the programme reviews in the sample assessed a programme leading to working in a regulated profession. Substandard **2.4** was therefore not applicable for any of them.

Standard 3 Study Programme

This is the standard with the highest number of programmes with shortcomings, with 11 out of 32 programmes assessed as less than fulfilling it. The majority of those issues concern **3.1 Curriculum** with ten programmes only partially fulfilling it. The most recommendations or conditions given relate to issues not specific to joint programmes. Six programmes received recommendations concerning the content of the programme, for three, the panels missed an accessible presentation of the curriculum such as a schematic of the semester structure. For two programmes, reviewers found course descriptions lacking information concerning content, teaching formats, bibliography, teaching staff, assessment and distribution of workload. Other more general issues identified for individual programmes concerned lack of clarity about prerequisites for courses as well as requirements to graduate, the need to better align course titles and content. In one report, reviewers recommended to place some courses earlier in the programme, another review pointed out the need for additional introductory courses in an interdisciplinary programme to harmonise student cohorts with diverse disciplinary backgrounds. A lack of English language literature on the bibliographies instead of local languages was another issue.

Issues identified that are specific to joint programmes addressed harmonisation of organisation, such as a need for clarity about additional required mobility at the beginning for initial courses and for activities between semesters. Another challenge in this respect was the need for a more detailed

presentation of complex semester structures and ensuring that there is no overlap in workload. Content related issues address the alignment of subjects and courses within specialisations, and the recommendation to evaluate the number of possible tracks and their content. One report stated a need to harmonise regulations for master theses between partner HEIs.

Only for one programme, **3.2 Credits** was assessed as less than fulfilled, based on large variations of ECTS credits per module between the HEIs.

Two programmes only partially fulfilled **3.3 Workload**, due to general issues: a lack of clarity about the distribution of workload between activities within courses and the option of a part-time track for which reviewers were not sure it would respect the workload required per ECTS credit. Issues identified in two other reports were more specific to joint programmes: the impact of mobility on workload as well as ensuring consistency between workload calculation across partners.

Standard 4 Admission and Recognition

Four of the reviewed programmes only partially fulfilled Standard 4. All of them had some issues with **4.1 Admission**. All issues discussed under this standard could come up in a programme provided by only one HEI as well. For two programmes, affirmative action rules are addressed; panels recommend including them in the admission criteria and making them explicit in a case where they are already planned. Two programmes received the recommendation to better define the entry profile of students. For one of them, the need of knowledge complementary to most prospective students' bachelor programmes is explicitly mentioned, another programme is recommended to carefully consider the evaluation of applicants holding a bachelor degree different from the programme's field. One programme is given specific recommendations concerning clarity of information about the admission procedure: the level of detail of the criteria and their ranking as well as how points can be achieved in different parts of the entry procedure. Properly justifying introductory courses designed to ensure a common starting point for all students is recommended to one programme. One programme is unclear in the level of qualification it requires for entry. As reviewers are not sure, if the programme allows entry based only on a level 6 EQF or also based on RPL, they recommend clarifying this aspect and reevaluating admission criteria with respect to legal requirements for entry into master programmes in the partner HEI's systems.

Two of the programmes additionally were assessed as only in partial fulfilment with **4.2 Recognition**. For both, the issues identified related to a lack of clarity in certain aspects of the recognition policy as part of the cooperation agreement, where one lacked detailed information on the number of ECTS credits recognised between HEIs and the other needed specification and alignment with admission requirements of the partner HEIs.

Standard 5 Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Nine of 43 programmes were found in partial fulfilment of this standard, six of them for **5.1 Learning and teaching**. A general issue for interdisciplinary programmes was addressed in two cases, the consideration of different backgrounds in learning and teaching methods to assure all students will be well prepared for the programme after the introductory phase or well supported in achieving the same ILOs throughout the programme, respectively. The use of digital learning tools and virtual learning environments was recommended in two reports as well. Two reports pointed out the lack of information on teaching formats and assessment methods in module and course descriptions, especially for innovative teaching formats. Issues concerning choice of teaching methods were raised in one report, with a need to prioritise achieving learning outcomes over project deliverables, the same report also recommended documentation of teachers' design choices to facilitate sharing of good practice and to periodically assess their fitness to support achievement of ILOs. Other issues

identified making achievement and assessment of ILOs for interpersonal skills more explicit, a need for more consideration of an ILO concerning multilingualism and the reconsideration of the design of the final thesis. One programme was recommended to underline its student-centred approach in its communication by using “learning” instead of “teaching”. Two reports included concerns specific to joint programmes, both related to the need for coordination mechanism or meetings between teaching staff to review and align content and running of the programme.

Eight of 43 programmes received an assessment of only partially fulfilling **5.2 Assessment of students**. In four of those cases, general issues in relation to a lack of information concerning assessment were pointed out, such as a general lack of detailed information and unclear information about the weight of each assessment component of each course. One panel pointed out the need to design assessment that provides students with useful feedback. Three reports include recommendations addressing specific challenges of joint programmes related to ensuring equal treatment of students, harmonizing examination methods and developing common standards by using joint rubrics for assessments. Another issue specific to a joint programme is an unclear responsibility for approval of assessment methods and all their components by a coordinating committee.

Standard 6 Student Support

With one programme not fulfilling this standard and another one assessed as partially fulfilling it, this is one of two standards with the highest level of compliance. In both cases, concerns were linked to the joint nature of the programmes: the former lacked a clear division of responsibilities between partners and consideration of their financial implications. For the latter, reviewers referred to the diversity of the desired student population and its specific, especially financial needs. The high level of fulfilment of this standard can be attributed to the fact that HEIs are aware of the high need of support for students in programmes that require multiple mobility periods.

Standard 7 Resources

This is the second standard with the lowest number of programmes assessed as only partially or not fulfilling the standard. A reason for this might be that HEIs develop and participate in joint programmes on top of their own educational offers, and they do so only, if they can provide the resources required, both in terms of qualified teaching staff as well as the necessary facilities and learning resources.

Two programmes were assessed as partially fulfilling **7.1 Staff**. One of them faced issues specific to joint programmes and received the recommendation that one partner needs to increase the number of teaching staff involved in delivering the programme to balance contributions by the different partners and ensure sustainability of this specific partner’s involvement. In addition, this programme was recommended to specify the contribution by teachers from associated partner involved in some of the programme’s modules.

The second programme was planning to enrol a high number of students and could not clarify how to recruit enough staff to deliver the programme at the necessary level of quality, an issue, that could apply to a programme implemented by one HEI alone as well. Another general issue of this programme led to it not fulfilling **7.2 Facilities**: It was meant to be delivered fully online via a specifically designed online platform which was not yet available by the time of the review and could therefore not be assessed by the review panel.

Standard 8 Transparency and Documentation

This standard was only partially fulfilled by six out of 43 programmes in the sample. General issues in three cases were related to standards 2 and 3 and the shortcomings of module and course descriptions identified under those. Other issues concerned the need for a more comprehensive presentation of the programme online, including handbooks and information illustrating career opportunities, such as alumni portraits. The lack of an effective communication strategy to ensure suitable candidates are reached and receive all necessary information was pointed out in one case. For a programme that was planned to be delivered fully online, the need to ensure the online infrastructure's ability to support the intended number of users was stated. For the same programme, an issue with clarity of information about the official recognition of the degree in all participation HEI's systems was identified. Two programmes were recommended to clearly communicate about function and responsibility and composition of their governing committees respectively. One panel also pointed out a joint programme's greater need for information about extra-curricular courses as different partner HEIs.

Standard 9 Quality Assurance

Six programmes were assessed as partially fulfilling the standard, one did not fulfil it. In four of these cases, issues appeared to be more general such as missing or incomplete QA policies. For two of those and two more reviewers identified challenges related to cooperation, such as lack of integration of institutional policies in a joint system, need for harmonisation or a lack of joint ownership and unclear responsibilities. For one programme, reviewers saw a lack of involvement of stakeholders from outside academia as an issue.

Conclusions and further research questions

For now, it is mostly joint programmes offered by European University Alliances and / or Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Programmes that are using the European Approach for their quality assurance. For the latter, it is encouraged by the design of the action and its award criteria (European Commission, 2025), the former might already have the expected criteria for the European Degree (Label) in mind (European Council, 2025). The European Approach provides a useful and coherent framework for evaluating joint programmes and identifying issues and room for improvement. These include both general aspects faced by all study programmes as well as such that arise from the specific challenges of international and inter-institutional cooperation. Institutions face most challenges related to Standard 3 Study Programme, followed by Standard 5 Learning, Teaching and Assessment. For Standards 6 Student Support and 7 Resources, the lowest number of programmes are assessed as less than fulfilling the requirements.

Reviewers take an explicitly enhancement-oriented approach to the procedures, not only pointing out issues leading to criteria being only partially fulfilled, but also making recommendations for further improvement in aspects that in principle fulfil expectations. The detail and depth of analysis provided in existing review reports can reassure national authorities hesitant to allow the use of the European Approach in their jurisdictions.

To further support building confidence in the European Approach, further research of its implementation with regards to part 2 of the ESG might be helpful. Questions could address implementation (2.3), given the challenges of assessing a programme provided in more than one location and country, as well as possible differences between ex-ante and ex-post reviews and the use of in-person or online site visits. More possible questions concern the composition of review panels (2.4) and the quality and accessibility of reports (2.6). Examining consistency of outcomes or decisions (2.5) – within the reviews implemented by one agency, but especially in comparing

European Approach reviews by different agencies – might provide a basis for highly relevant discussions of cross-border EQA in general that could support national authorities' trust in the work of agencies outside their legislative control.

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