

The European Approach For Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

Outcomes Peer Learning Activity

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Text: Rosa Becker

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1. Context and aim of the PLA

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA) is based on one single joint programme accreditation that is recognised in all EHEA countries involved. This approach should replace the separate national programme accreditations in joint programme consortium countries. The EA is based on European agreed standards and procedures that genuinely reflect the joint character of joint programmes. The main characteristics of the European Approach are as follows:

- If some of the cooperating higher education institutions (HEIs) are required to undergo external quality assessment or accreditation at programme level, then the co-operating institution should select a suitable quality assurance agency (QAA) from the list of EQAR-registered agencies;
- This agency will then use the agreed standards and procedures of the European Approach to carry out a single evaluation or accreditation of the entire joint programme;
- The external quality assurance decision is to be accepted and recognised in all EHEA countries where the programme is offered. Countries should not apply any additional national criteria.

In May 2015 in Yerevan, the education ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have agreed to adopt the European Approach.¹ The importance of the EA was repeated at the EHEA ministerial meeting in Paris in 2018. Since then, however, only a small number of countries have acted on this agreement and removed additional national accreditation requirements from their national legislation and regulations, to implement the European Approach. This makes it difficult for joint programme consortia, quality assurance organisations and ministries of education to adopt the European Approach in practice.

Progress is being made, nevertheless, and there are several joint programme consortia, whose programmes have gained European Approach accreditation and that have developed good practices, along with experiences and tips to share.

The aim of our Peer Learning Activity (PLA) was threefold, namely to:

- disseminate European Approach standards and guidelines to Dutch joint programme coordinators,
- identify good practice approaches and tips for using the European Approach, and formulate models to implement the European Approach, and
- formulate concrete action points to remove still existing hindrances.

During the PLA, the basic EA standards and guidelines were disseminated. The standards and guidelines are available on the EQAR website.²

This report includes the PLA conclusions. It suggests good practice approaches or 'models' to implement the European Approach, and serves as input for the Bologna Follow-up Group that prepares the next meeting of the education ministers of the EHEA in June 2020 in Rome.

2. Recent developments

In October 2017, we organised an international Peer Learning Activity on the European Approach to share EA experiences, identify hindrances to implementation, and to formulate action points for ministries of education, quality assurance organisations, higher education institutions, and the European Commission/EACEA.³ The main conclusion of our 2017 PLA was that many countries had not yet adapted their national legislation to implement the EA, and that it was urgent to do so, in accordance with the Ministerial agreement in Yerevan.

Our latest PLA showed that since October 2017, there have been four main developments in the implementation of the European Approach:

1. The ImpEA project⁴ has strongly encouraged implementation of the EA by:
 - identifying key obstacles in implementing the EA,
 - supporting partner QAAs in running EA accreditation procedures,
 - supporting four joint programme consortia in pursuing EA accreditation,
 - organising several project meetings (2017-2020)
 - developing an EA implementation toolkit (currently being developed).
2. The European Commission (EC) supports the European Approach:
 - The Erasmus+ Programme guide now includes an invitation (or implicit recommendation) for programme coordinators of Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (EMJMDs) to use the EA.
 - The EC has organised two EMJMD Joint Programme Cluster meetings on the EA (in October 2018⁵ and June 2019) focussed on peer learning among EMJMD programme coordinators.
3. The number of European joint programme consortia that have gained EA accreditation has increased from 4 in 2017 to 10 in 2019, which is a promising increase.

During our PLA, 8 coordinators of Dutch-foreign joint programmes indicated that they hope and intend to use the EA for the first time in the coming two years.

Throughout Europe, several other peer support meetings have been organised on the EA (in addition to the ImpEA and EC meetings), two of which took place before our own 2017 PLA, including (i) the HERE-ES project Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, Salamanca, in 2015; (ii) the International Conference Single accreditation of joint programmes, Vilnius, 2017, and (ii) the Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance, PLA on the EA, Limassol, 2019.

4. The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training has made it a legal requirement for Flemish-foreign joint degree programmes to gain European Approach accreditation. The European Approach is legally required for new international joint degree programmes, first accreditations of international joint degree programmes, and for international joint degree programmes if an institutional review outcome was negative. This is a very interesting requirement as it means that international consortium partners within new Flemish-international joint degree programme consortia are also required to use the EA.

In the Netherlands, the EA has been fully implemented in national legislation and regulations: the EA can be used without any additional national requirements.

Importantly, however, our PLA and PLA survey results⁶ show that a remaining problem is that not all countries have integrated the EA in their national legislation, nor have all countries ensured that the EA accreditation results are accepted by their national QAAs.

3. A good practice model for implementation

The PLA speakers and participants formulated good practices and tips in implementing the European Approach, and a series of steps that can be followed to use the European Approach. From these good practices and steps, we have deduced a 'model' for joint programme consortia to implement the European Approach. This paragraph suggests a 'good practice model for EA implementation' and offers tips for using the EA.

The following steps form a good practice model for joint programme consortia to use the EA.⁷

Step 1: Read carefully the [text on the European Approach](#) (October 2014, approved by EHEA ministers in May 2015)⁸

Check in EA, Section A, whether the EA *should* or *may* be applied:

- a. If (one or) some of the cooperating HEIs require external QA at programme level, the EA should be applied,
- b. If all cooperating HEIs require external QA at institutional level and have self-accreditation status, the EA may be used,
- c. Even if the EA is not compulsory, consider using the EA.

Determine within your consortium why you need the EA. Key reasons are and can be⁹:

- The EA saves time since it replaces the separate national accreditations at programme level. Consortia that have used the EA mention clear benefits of a single accreditation procedure.
- By using the EA, you show consistency of the joint programme, and strong cooperation in implementation and delivery.
- The EA is an evaluation procedure that truly takes account of the joint nature of a joint programme. It considers and evaluates the joint programme as a whole, rather than a sum of separate parts. The EA takes aspects into account that are often not sufficiently analysed in national accreditations, such as jointness, student support, and transparency in a global context.
- The EA helps to promote the international prestige of your joint programme by standing out in comparison to other joint programmes.
- Using the EA helps to facilitate the awarding of joint degrees: joint degrees should be intertwined with the European Approach.

Step 2: Check the EA guidelines on the EQAR, ECA and ImpEA websites

- a. Check the [ECA website](#) and its information on the [ImpEA project](#),
- b. Check the [ImpEA website](#),
- c. Check the [EQAR website](#). This site includes information on the EA, but also country-specific information on all EHEA countries. On this website, select your consortium countries one by one, and read carefully all information per country.

Step 3: Create your own comparative overview in a table, with details on each partner country (taken from the EQAR website)

In your table, include relevant information from the EQAR website for each of your consortium partner countries. For each partner/country, include details on the following issues:

- Is the EA legally allowed? Under which conditions?
- Is external QA needed at programme or institutional level?
- What are the relevant external quality assurance agencies?
- What is the accreditation status? Valid until when?
- What is the degree and qualification?

Step 4: With this basic information, check the eligibility of the consortium and its partners

Check the eligibility according to the text in [EAQAJP, Section B1.1](#)¹⁰⁾

- If YES ELIGIBLE, continue with your steps,
- If NO, NOT ELIGIBLE, please 'repair' or stop the EA preparation procedure.

Step 5: Jointly select a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency

See [EAQAJP, Section C0](#).¹¹ The selection must be a joint decision by the consortium partners.

Moreover, establish good cooperation between the QAA, the joint programme consortium, and local authorities in the partner institutions, with a shared aim to make EA progress a success, respecting each other's roles and responsibilities at the same time.

Step 6: Start thinking about the planning of the single site visit for the review panel

Jointly decide where, when, who should attend. See [EAQAJP, Section C3](#).¹²

Step 7: Start preparing the Self-Evaluation Report (SER)

See [EAQAJP, Section C1](#).¹³

- a. Make use of the ImpEA template for the SER (to be published on the [ImpEA website](#) in 2020),

- b. Start in time, collecting all relevant information that needs to be included in the SER, either in the main report or in the annexes, (this can be relatively easy if you offer an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD), in which case you can base your EA SER on your EMJMD application),
- c. Preparing the SER is a joint consortium project, involving all stakeholders and relevant agencies.
 - Ensure that all stakeholders remain focused on getting the SER ready (getting the job done).
- d. If necessary, discuss clarification of the meaning of EA standards with the QAA conducting the EA,
- e. Be honest and transparent in all aspects of information you provide, both in the SER and in the site visit interviews. Be factual and self-critical.

Step 8: Prepare and organise the review committee's site visit

- a. Have the joint programme coordinator easing the preparation of the accreditation process. Ensure that the joint preparation process for the site visit by consortium partners promotes jointness and a feeling of shared responsibility. Create a pleasant and constructive atmosphere.
- b. Start discussing the review with the respective quality assurance agency conducting the review one year before the actual review takes place. That way, your consortium has time to prepare the review step by step. Start looking for good review panel members at a very early stage if you have the possibility to suggest review panel members to the agency.
- c. Prepare the site visit at a regular consortium management meeting. Get the consortium to sit together and try to answer expected review questions, in order to identify weaknesses in advance.
- d. Organise, in consultation with the QA agency, e.g. one full day review committee site visit. Arrange, for instance, interviews with management (Directors of Studies), lecturers of different partner universities, students studying at different partner institutions, alumni (now employees and employers) who graduated at the different partner institutions, and course managers and student advisors of the partner institutions.
- e. Consult with the QA agency on starting the site visit with a short informal meeting of review panel and consortium representation.
- f. Consult with the QA agency on finishing the site visit with an initial conclusion of panel including its ordeal: met / not met standards.

Step 9: Ensure recognition of the EA accreditation decision in partner countries

After the final EA accreditation decision has been taken, the joint programme consortium partners contact their national QA authorities, asking them to recognise the accreditation decision. Consider whether the responses of the national QA authorities can be made public to increase transparency on the decision-making.

Tips for joint programme consortia

- Solve all obstacles step by step. It helps when partners know and trust each other.
- Dare to ask questions to people with European Approach experience.
- Good practice:
 - Identify who is responsible for what within the consortium,
 - Identify the boundaries of your flexibility and make sure you use them to your advantage,
 - Challenge accreditation authorities in order to move implementation of the EA forward,
 - Create a joint team of academic and administrative staff to ensure consistent understanding and implementation of regulations,
 - Communicate within your institution (make sure that the good practices and experiences with the EA are identified and disseminated),
 - Use formal and informal channels to realise institutional ownership and support for the EA. Identify those administrative and senior management staff that are excited about EA and doing something new.

General tip

- We need *one central place* with clear and structured guidelines on EA procedures, to guide joint programme consortia (and other relevant stakeholders). Guidelines are needed on:
 - how to start the EA procedure,
 - how to continue,
 - how to complete the EA process (e.g. which steps need to be taken after the final accreditation decision has been announced by the QAA, in order to get the accreditation decision recognised in all relevant partner countries), and
 - at all steps: who to address and who needs to take the initiative: the leading consortium partner or the leading QAA?

Some guidelines are currently provided (and being developed) on the websites of EQAR, ImpEA, and Peer Learning Activities, but it is helpful for joint programme consortia to have all relevant guidelines published in one central place.

For more details on good practices, recommendations and tips, please see the [PLA powerpoint presentations](#).¹⁴

4. Action points for Ministries of Education

The PLA working groups formulated the following action points for Ministries of Education in the EHEA. The most crucial action point remains to ensure that the European Approach is implemented in national legislation.

Key action points:

1. **Implement the European Approach in national legislation by removing additional national requirements.** Act in accordance with the EHEA ministerial agreement: European Approach accreditation takes place without additional national criteria.

National legislation must give joint programme consortia a legal choice to choose national accreditation or European Approach accreditation.

'No additional national requirements beyond the EA' means: no additional national requirements, national law does not apply here. Ministries of education must communicate this very clearly.

2. When additional steps/obstacles result from national regulations, work to dismantle them.
3. Provide clarity of regulations and their practical understanding in all respects – what is possible in each country, and what is not.
4. Ensure consistency between different legal regulations and practice of various regulators in the system.

Other action points:

5. Identify the joint programmes – know your landscape.
6. Identify and disseminate good practices that already exist in your territory.
7. Make the regulations regarding the joint diploma more flexible.
8. If programme accreditation is mandatory then consider to follow – in your national legislations – the Flemish example with the obligatory EA-based accreditation for joint degree programmes.

5. Action points for Quality Assurance Agencies

PLA participants formulated the following action points for Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs).

Key action points:

1. Establish an internal 'contact point' for the EA procedure.
2. Be responsive to HEIs' requests for information, providing sufficient information and guidance to HEIs, such as:
 - a. clear manuals or other guiding information (e.g. on how to select a suitable QAA to do the EA),
 - b. training or information events for the HEIs in their country,
 - c. contribute to national Peer Learning Activities,
 - d. cooperate with other QAAs in the same country on these issues, if applicable.

Make sure that your webpage on the EA is comprehensive and updated (including frequently asked questions).

3. Do not create additional procedural steps or obstacles after EA accreditation by an EQAR-registered agency. But if, and as long as there are additional requirements or procedures,

provide clear and transparent information on what is required and expected. Share this information with other QAAs.

4. QAAs have different levels of knowledge on the EA. QAAs need to interact more, exchanging knowledge on the EA, adopt EA procedures without additional national criteria, and ideally harmonise and provide equal levels of information and guidelines. This can be organised through training courses for QAA staff, staff mobility and QAA websites.
5. Prepare the review panels well for their task. Panel members should be instructed that they are expected to review with an open mind, disconnecting themselves from national and local review formats, experiences and expectations.
6. Document the answers you give to different institutions.
7. Prepare a 'handbook' – perhaps as a shared initiative between ECA, ENQA, and (if appropriate) EQAR – aimed at QAAs and joint programme consortia. The handbook should include guidelines on how to read / interpret the nine standards-related questions, indicate points of attention and good practices. Such a handbook should facilitate the preparation for the accreditation process, the writing of the self-evaluation report, and the implementation of the site visit (e.g. indicating who would be present, how the review day can be organised, and what to expect).
8. Assist the consortium in formulating a clear road map from the moment the EA accreditation decision has been taken, specifying how and when the accreditation decision could be recognised by the consortium partner countries.

Other action points:

9. Try to identify a common approach in different cases (to give the same answers to everyone).
10. QAAs must accept English as working and reporting language, since it is the official language of the EA.
11. A QAA network to organise and coordinate training courses on the EA, supporting the QAAs.

General action point:

It is useful to have all relevant European Approach information in one central place to keep a clear overview.

6. Action Points for Joint Programme Consortia

The PLA formulated the following action points for joint programme consortia.

Key action points:

1. Take into account European Approach requirements when preparing / updating / reviewing the consortium cooperation agreement.

This also implies having the European Approach in mind already before taking the official consortium steps, e.g. to develop joint programme procedures or examination regulations.

2. Use all information available: ImpEA project information, templates, EQAR website and experiences by other successful joint international programmes. Don't be afraid to ask questions to relevant persons for information.
3. Identify relevant stakeholders within your institutions (incl. international offices) – for quality assurance purposes. Establish an internal support unit to get the accreditation organised.

Other action points:

4. Explain and agree within the consortium why the European Approach accreditation is relevant and important.
5. Make the rules that you follow clear and easily available to everyone.
6. Identify your partners national regulations – make sure that you follow only the critical ones.
7. Know your partners internal procedures (especially who needs to sign relevant documents).
8. Build your internal quality assurance on the EA standards – balance with your institutional requirements.
9. Be more pushy towards your institutions and ministries on implementing the EA.
10. Time management: plan in advance and involve all partners in order to foresee any possible obstacles. Set a clear road map with milestones.
11. Take advantage of peer to peer learning.
12. Go for it!

7. Sources

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Endnotes

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⁷ With particular thanks to the recommendations and European Approach steps offered by Wicher Schreuders, Coordinator EMLE joint programme, Erasmus University Rotterdam, and to the good practice recommendations offered by Peter Elting, Coordinator ITEPS programme, NHL/Stenden University of Applied Sciences, and Robert Wagenaar, Coordinator Euroculture programme, University of Groningen. See all PLA powerpoint presentations, PLA 'European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, The Hague, 2-3 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.erasmusplus.nl/node/719>.

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⁹ With particular thanks to Euroculture consortium presenters Robert Wagenaar (University of Groningen) and Maite Sagasti (Deusto University) and to Peter Elting, ITEPS coordinator, NHL/Stenden University of Applied Sciences. See all PLA powerpoint presentations, PLA 'European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, The Hague, 2-3 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.erasmusplus.nl/node/719>.

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