

REACU

Spanish Network
of Quality Assurance Agencies
in Higher Education

**EVALUATION PROTOCOL
FOR INTERNATIONAL JOINT DEGREES IN
ACCORDANCE WITH THE
*European Approach for Quality
Assurance of Joint Programmes***

In compliance with Royal Decree 822/2021, 28 September, on the
organisation of Higher Education and the procedure for its quality
assurance

Approved by REACU on 29 April, 2022

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the Ministers responsible for Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) signed the Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué¹ and adopted the **European Approach for Quality Assurance of joint Programmes**² designed and implemented by two or more European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This approach is based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015³) and, therefore, it is applicable by all the different external quality assurance systems in the EHEA. The European Approach aims to:

- Eliminate hurdles for the development of joint programmes through the provision of standards based in the tools agreed by the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria.
- Provide integrated approaches for quality assurance of joint programmes which reflect their jointness.

Therefore, it is intended to facilitate the acceptance of joint programmes accreditation based only on an accreditation procedure in all the EHEA, by significantly reducing the HEIs efforts related to multiple accreditations of these programmes under different national regulatory frameworks.

Additionally, in order to move forward in the development of a real EHEA internationally competitive, in 2019 the European Commission launched the European Universities Initiative through the Erasmus + Programme, consortia composed of several European HEIs delivering a common training and research project to promote European values. It is expected that the European Universities decisively contribute to the achievement of an ambitious vision of a European Education Area (EEA) and a European Research Area (ERA), innovative, competitive and worldwide attractive⁴.

In Spain, Royal decree 822/2021, 28 September, on the regulation of official Higher Education and the procedure for its quality assurance, provides in article 5.5 that Spanish universities can apply for the verification of a joint study plan, designed by one or more Spanish universities and one or several foreign universities (referenced in this document as *Higher Education Institutions, HEIs*), leading to the achievement of a university official Bachelor, Master or Doctorate Degree, which will be formalised in an agreement annexed to the verification report.

In accordance with the Sixth and Seventh additional dispositions in the above-mentioned Royal Decree, the HEIs can apply the **European Approach for Quality Assurance of International joint Programmes** with regard to the different stages in the processes for verification, substantial modification and accreditation renewal of a joint degree whenever the coordinating HEIs' country had endorsed this procedure.

Furthermore, it provides the recognition by Spanish QA agencies of the evaluation reports issued by the quality assurance entities registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), through the different stages in the review process for verification, substantial modification and accreditation of a joint degree.

¹ <https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-conference-yerevan-2015>

² <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/>

³ <https://www.enqa.eu/esg-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-the-european-higher-education-area/>

⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49659/st08658-en21.pdf>

Therefore, the scenario outlined in the Royal Decree related to the evaluation of international joint programmes requires the definition of action protocols by the Spanish quality assurance agencies either for the evaluation process or for the recognition of the review report issued by an EQAR-registered agency, so that the HEIs can register a joint degree in the Register for Universities, Centres and Degrees (RUCT) as a Spanish official degree. With regard to external review, these protocols consider all international joint programmes regardless of the type of HEIs consortium involved (recognised or not as a European University).

Definitions

In accordance with the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*, **joint programmes** are considered as an integrated curriculum, coordinated and delivered jointly by several Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) from EHEA countries, regardless of their recognition as double/multiple, or joint degrees at the respective countries⁵. The type of recognition achieved by joint programmes students will be based on the national regulatory frameworks provided at the participating institutions' countries.

It is important to emphasise that the European Approach only includes joint programmes offered jointly by Higher Education Institutions from two or more countries, therefore quality assurance of joint programmes provided by several Higher Education Institutions from the same country is not addressed.

⁵ Definitions and explanations on <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/definitions/> and <http://ecahe.eu/latest-publications/publication-joint-programmes-from-a-to-z-guide/>

EUROPEAN APPROACH: STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

The standards and guidelines agreed in the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes are:

1. Eligibility

1.1 HEIs Status

The HEIs (consortium, hereinafter) which offer a joint programme should be recognised as Higher Education institutions by the relevant authorities at their countries. Their respective national regulatory frameworks should enable them to participate the joint programme and, if applicable, to award a joint degree. The institutions awarding the degree(s) should ensure that the degree(s) belong/s to the Higher Education systems from the countries where they are based.

1.2 Joint Design and Delivery

The joint programme should be offered jointly, and all the cooperating institutions should participate in the design and delivery of the programme.

1.3 Cooperation Agreement

The conditions and terms of the joint programme should be laid down in a cooperation agreement signed by the cooperating institutions. This agreement should cover the following issues:

- Denomination of the degree(s) awarded in the programme.
- The partners' coordination and responsibilities with regard to management and financial organisation (including funding, sharing of costs, income, etc.).
- Students admission and selection procedures.
- Mobility of students and teaching staff.
- Examinations regulations, students assessment methods, recognition of credits and degree awarding procedures in the consortium.

2. LEARNING OUTCOMES

2.1 Level [ESG 1.2]

The intended learning outcomes should align with the corresponding level in the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA), as well as the applicable national qualifications frameworks.

2.2 Disciplinary Field

The intended learning outcomes should comprise knowledge, skills, and competencies in the respective disciplinary fields.

2.3 Achievement [ESG 1.2]

The programme should be able to demonstrate that the intended learning outcomes are achieved.

2.4 Regulated professions

If relevant for a specific joint programme, the minimum agreed training conditions specified in the EU Directive 2013/55/UE, which modifies the Directive 2005/36/CE, and its future modifications, with regard to the recognition of professional qualifications, or the relevant common frameworks covered by the Directive should be taken into account.

3. Study Programme [ESG 1.2]

3.1 Study Plan

The structure and content of the study plan should enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

3.2 Credits

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) should be applied accordingly and the distribution of credits should be clear.

3.3 Workload

A joint Bachelor programme will amount to a total student workload of 180-240 ECTS-credits, a joint Master programme will amount to 90-120 ECTS-credits and it should not be less than 60 ECTS-credits (credits ranges according to the QF-EHEA); for joint doctoral programmes there is no credit range specified.

The workload and the average time to complete the programme should be monitored.

4. Admission and Recognition [ESG 1.4]

4.1. Admission

The admission requirements and selection procedures should be appropriate and take into account the programme's level and discipline.

4.2. Recognition

The recognition of qualifications and periods of studies (including recognition of prior learning) should be applied in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and subsidiary documents.

5. Learning, Teaching and Assessment [ESG 1.3]

5.1 Learning and Teaching

The programme should be designed according to the intended learning outcomes, and the learning and teaching approaches should be appropriate to achieve them. Students diversity and their needs should be respected and attended to, specially taking into account their different cultural realities.

5.2 Assessment of students

The examination regulations and the assessment of achieved learning outcomes should correspond with the intended learning outcomes. They should be applied consistently by all partner institutions.

6. Student support [ESG 1.6]

The students support services should contribute to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. The specific challenges of enrolled students participating in mobility programmes should be taken into account.

7. Resources [ESG 1.5 y 1.6]

7.1 Staff

Staff should be sufficient and adequate (qualifications, professional and international experience) to implement the study programme.

7.2 Facilities

The facilities provided must be sufficient and appropriate taking into account the intended learning outcomes.

8. Transparency and documentation [ESG 1.8]

The relevant information about the programme such as admission requirements and procedures, course catalogue, examination and assessment procedures, among others, should be well documented and published, and the specific challenges of enrolled students participating in mobility programmes should be taken into account.

9. Quality Assurance [ESG 1.1 and part 1]

The cooperating institutions should apply joint internal quality assurance processes according to part 1 of ESG 2015.

A detailed explanation on each standard is included in the section “Understanding EA”⁶ of the Erasmus+ project “Facilitating the implementation of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes – ImpEA”⁷.

The equivalence between the European Approach and ESG2015 standards is summarised in the following table:

ESG2015	European Approach
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	2. Learning outcomes 3. Study programme
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	4. Admission and recognition
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	5. Learning, teaching and assessment
1.6 Learning resources and student support	6. Student support
1.5 Teaching staff 1.6 Learning resources and student support	7. Resources
1.8. Public information	8. Transparency and documentation
1.1 Policy for quality assurance 1.7. Information management 1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes 1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	9. Quality assurance

⁶ <https://impea.eu/understanding-ea/>

⁷ <https://impea.eu/>

PROCEDURE FOR RECOGNITION BY SPANISH QA AGENCIES OF JOINT STUDY PLANS EVALUATION REPORTS ISSUED BY AN EQAR-REGISTERED AGENCY

In accordance with the Sixth and Seven additional dispositions in RD 822/2021, the review reports issued by the evaluation entities registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), will be recognised by the Spanish Quality Assurance Agencies responsible of issuing the report according to the procedure for verification of official study plans (RD 822/2021, article 26).

Therefore, the agencies, in the exercise of the powers conferred, must provide the mechanisms for recognition of the review reports on international joint programmes in the EHEA whenever the coordinating HEI's country had approved the use of the European Approach and the institutions responsible of the joint programme had chosen and applied for review by an EQAR-registered quality assurance agency and the evaluation process had been conducted in accordance with procedure provided in the European Approach. In compliance with the procedure established, the agency will issue a recognition report on the evaluation outcome carried out according to the European Approach, which will be Favourable or Unfavourable to the resolution of the quality assurance procedure. In case of university joint Bachelor degrees with a workload different to the credits workload provided in RD 822/2021, the report will include information on this regard, in compliance with the Sixth and Seven additional dispositions, section 10. The report will be remitted to the Spanish HEI participating in the joint degree, the responsible entity at the Autonomous Community and the Council for Universities in order to complete the registration process of the joint degree in the Register for Universities, Centres and Degrees (RUCT) and the recognition as official degree in Spain in case of obtaining a favourable report.

The Spanish HEI participating in the international joint programme will carry out the mandatory proceedings leading to the recognition of the joint programme as official degree in Spain through the competent Ministry and the corresponding autonomous community.

PROCEDURE FOR THE EVALUATION OF INTERNATIONAL JOINT PROGRAMMES IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE EUROPEAN APPROACH

If an international joint programme is reviewed by a Spanish agency, the HEIs consortium will establish the coordinating HEIs responsible of communicating directly with the agency, as well as the Spanish HEI responsible of registration in RUCT for its recognition as an official degree in Spain.

Self-assessment Report [ESG 2.3]

The first element in the procedure for the joint programme external quality assurance is based on a self-evaluation report which is jointly developed by the consortium. The self-assessment report must include complete information and evidence compliance with all the above-mentioned standards and guidelines provided by the European Approach for quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

Furthermore, the report must include information on the participating HEIs respective national regulatory frameworks so that the review panel can value the context and specially the programme positioning in each national Higher Education system.

The self-evaluation report must highlight the differentiating characteristic of the joint programme as a joint effort by the HEIs from different Higher Education systems.

The self-assessment report will be preferably issued in English. The use of another language must be agreed between the HEI coordinating the review process and the Spanish agency. The translation of documentation required is carried out by the applicant consortium. The consortium can use the template provided by ImpEA⁸ to complete the self-assessment report.

Review panel [ESG 2.3 y 2.4]

The review panel for the application of the European Approach is selected according to the criteria of eligibility, independence, gender, responsibility, availability and representation, and it is composed by at least four members. The panel must combine experience in the programme academic field, the labour market and in Higher Education quality assurance. Additionally, the panel will have knowledge on Higher Education systems of the concerned HEIs and of the language/s in which the programme is/are lectured. The panel is composed of members from at least two countries involved in the consortium delivering the programme and at least a student. Spanish agencies ensure the selection of the more appropriate members with the profile required to carry out the review. The panel will be assisted by technical staff from the Spanish agency who does not participate in the evaluation.

Following the panel selection, a panel member can be recused by the consortium with proper justification, though it will not have the right to veto. The Spanish agency analyses the objections and appoints the panel members including all the changes that might be required.

⁸ <http://impea.online/template-for-self-evaluation-released/>

All the panel members sign the ethical commitment and they are specifically trained on the review process, its functions and the use of the European Approach.

Visit [ESG 2.3]

The review panel, supported by technical staff from the Spanish agency, proposes a visit programme including meetings with representatives from all the HEIs involved in the joint programme, specially, with the HEI and the programme's management team, teaching staff, students and other relevant stakeholders, as graduates and professional representatives.

The programme and the HEI hosting the visit are established in accordance with the institution coordinating the review.

Participation in the meetings is preferably on-site, although the possibility of virtual visits is also considered, and if applicable video conferencing systems will be provided by the visited HEI.

The panel review might request additional information with regard to the self-evaluation report which will be reviewed through the visit. To that end, the required list of additional documentary evidence will be annexed to the visit programme proposal.

The hosting HEI provides an appropriate facility for the meetings, as well as the resources required by the review panel.

Review report [ESG 2.3 y 2.6]

The review panel issues a provisional report, preferably in English, including the analysis and relevant decisions regarding compliance with each standard provided by the European Approach that must be justified taking into account the SER, the documentary evidence provided and the findings throughout the visit.

Each standard is valued as "achieved", "partially achieved" or "not achieved".

The provisional report includes best practices detected by the review panel and the aspects that, according to the panel, improve the joint programme proposal, as well as, if applicable, the mandatory elements which must be modified in order to achieve a favourable report.

The provisional report is remitted to the coordinating HEI which, within the deadline provided, might respond on the possible material errors detected, however no additional documentary evidence can be submitted. Whether no allegations are received within this deadline, the provisional report will be considered as final report.

After review of the HEI's answer to the provisional report issued by the review panel, a final report proposal is drafted, including a recommendation for the decision on the formal outcome of the review. The review panel can use the evaluation report template provided by ImPEA⁹.

Formal Outcomes and Decision [ESG 2.5]

Taking into account the review panel's recommendation, the Spanish agency issues a formal decision on the evaluation outcome according to the established procedure, either Favourable or

⁹ http://impea.online/io4_panel-report_template_final/

Unfavourable, which will be valid for 6 years since the signature date. Additionally, the report will provide the periodicity for the follow-up review. This report, in case of joint Bachelor degrees with a workload different to the load established in RD 822/2021, it will pronounce on this regard, in accordance with additional dispositions Sixth, section 4, and Seven, section 10.

The Spanish agency remits the formal decision on the review process to the coordinating HEI, which will send it to the rest of institutions involved so that they can carry out the procedures required in each country for the official recognition of the joint programme.

Complaints and appeals [ESG 2.7]

With regard to this review process the HEIs can submit an appeal in accordance with the procedure provided by the quality assurance agency.

Reporting [ESG 2.6]

The review report and the outcome of the formal decision will be published on the official website of the quality assurance agency, as well as on the database DEQAR¹⁰.

Follow-up [ESG 2.3]

After obtaining a favourable review and with the periodicity established in the evaluation report by the quality assurance agency, the HEIs responsible of the joint programme will remit to the Spanish agency a follow-up report on the joint degree implementation, in accordance with the follow-up programme established by the Spanish agency.

The report will be preferably reviewed by the initial review panel, who will issue a valuation report on the programme implementation, including recommendations, if applicable.

Periodicity [ESG 1.10]

The joint programme is periodically reviewed every 6 years, therefore the formal decision provides its validity period. The consortium is responsible of requesting a new review at least a year before meeting the 6 years deadline since the last one. In case of choosing a different agency, the consortium must communicate this decision to the Spanish agency.

If applicable, the HEIs must communicate the Spanish agency about the consortium dissolution and the mechanisms established for the joint programme completion.

¹⁰ <https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/search/by-institution/>