



Quality Assurance and Global Tertiary Education: Navigating Challenges and Embracing Innovation

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Joint accreditation as an instrument of enhancement of Quality Assurance policies

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Abstract:

The paper explores the importance and benefits of external quality assurance (QA) of teaching and learning in higher education institutions (HEIs) carried out jointly by domestic and foreign QA agencies. It outlines the primary challenges that QA agencies encounter while carrying out joint accreditation procedures. This paper particularly focuses on the cases of joint accreditation. It also examines policies and perspectives of joint accreditation and explores good international practices.

The National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA, Russia) shares its experience of carrying out accreditation procedures jointly with foreign QA agencies and focuses on the main challenges and opportunities that this procedure may have for different stakeholders (governing bodies, universities, QA agencies, students, scholars, etc.). By analysing the methodology of joint accreditation as a QA phenomenon, the author focuses on its specific features, stages, benefits, and challenges and outlines the prospects of quality assurance in higher education for international cooperation.

Introduction

Joint accreditation is not a new notion in QA terminology. In order to understand the meaning of a term and its importance for the national context, it is helpful to explore the terminology.

First of all, users and the public associate joint accreditation with the evaluation of network educational programmes, or double degree educational programmes that ensure collaboration by connecting learners from different locations and offering flexibility of time and location, thus enabling students to access educational resources offered by several educational institutions and participate in activities at their convenience.

Joint or double degree programmes and network educational programmes involve collaboration between two or more organisations in different countries, joining their resources and expertise to offer students a comprehensive and globally-oriented educational experience. Such programmes are recognized through external evaluation, which means that they meet the established standards of quality and academic rigour, validating the collaborative efforts of participating universities and QA agencies and safeguarding the interests of students in the long run.

Accreditation of joint programmes generally implies global recognition. Accreditation through joint bodies enhances the credibility and recognition of double degree programmes and network educational programmes on a global scale, signaling to stakeholders that the qualifications obtained are of high quality and meet international standards. As the mobility of students and the development of joint programmes increases, there is an even greater need for international recognition of the quality education being provided.

Accreditation in higher education is a process through which educational institutions and programmes are evaluated by QA agencies to ensure they meet certain standards of quality and excellence. Accreditation helps to maintain and improve the quality of education by holding institutions accountable for their performance and encouraging continuous improvement.

There are different types of accreditation, such as national accreditation, which often involves only local experts; international accreditation, which typically applies to reviews based on international standards and involving international experts; and joint accreditation, when the review is conducted by a domestic and a foreign agency and, as a result, two independent decisions are made.

Global studies and overview of joint accreditation cases

US case

The first and only procedure of joint accreditation for interprofessional continuing education in the health professions is represented by IPCE which includes 10 accrediting bodies as of now. Using a single, uniform application process, fee payment guidelines, and accreditation standards, they make it possible for the educational institutions to be accredited concurrently to deliver a range of job-specific continuing education programmes.

It allows to award interprofessional continuing education credit (IPCE) to athletic trainers, dentists, dietitians, nurses, optometrists, physician associates/physician assistants, pharmacists, physicians, psychologists, and social workers without the need for additional accreditations (<https://jointaccreditation.org/>).

Twelve core joint accreditation criteria cover the requirements for providers of continuing education for the health-care team in such areas as mission and overall programme improvement, activity planning and evaluation, integrity and independence. The standards have been adopted by Joint Accreditation and the co-founders of Joint Accreditation (the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME); Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE), and the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC)), as well as other accrediting bodies in healthcare. As a result, medical professionals are provided with a special Joint Accreditation Provider Mark and are listed in JAPARS database.

European case

Joint accreditation of study programmes represents a contemporary trend in enhancing quality assurance within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). During the Erevan conference in May 2015, the European Ministers responsible

for higher education endorsed the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, setting guidelines and protocols for joint accreditation. They approved the document «European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes», which laid out standards and procedures, based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria.

The European approach for quality assurance of joint programmes is expected to facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes that genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character (<https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/agreed-standards>).

The institutions that offer joint programmes should also be recognised by relevant authorities of their countries. Their respective national legal frameworks should enable them to participate in the joint programme and, if applicable, to award a joint degree. The institutions awarding such a degree should ensure that the degree belongs to the higher education degree system of the countries in which they are based.

European QA agency (EQAA) uses 9 specific standards for Joint Degrees: 1) Eligibility; 2) Learning Outcomes; 3) Study Programme; 4) Admission and Recognition; 5) Learning, Teaching and Assessment; 6) Student Support; 7) Resources; 8) Transparency and Documentation; 9) Quality Assurance (<https://eqaa.eu/en/accreditation/standards/>).

Taiwan, Japanese, Thailand, Australian, and Mongolian case

Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association (TWAEA), Japan (Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA)), and Thailand (Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA)) collectively developed the Handbook for joint accreditation among Taiwan, Japan, and Thailand, and also designed TWAEA International Pilot Platform (pp.twaea.org.tw/en) to lead Taiwan's higher education to be more internationalized.

JUAA and TWAEA initiated joint accreditation in 2018 and were consequently joined by the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA, Thailand) in 2021 and the Mongolian National Council for Education Accreditation (MNCEA, Mongolia) in 2024. Thus, this project is currently being operated by these four agencies. The framework and standards were integrated to create synergies within each region through the knowledge exchange on international evaluation practice. In 2022, the Higher Education Accreditation & Evaluation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT, Taiwan) and the International Centre of Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality Education (THE-ICE, Australia) also developed the joint accreditation model for cross-border higher education between Taiwan and Australia.

THE-ICE (Australia) has expanded into a global organisation with a network of 44 members in 19 countries across 4 continents and sees this project as an opportunity to investigate the feasibility of developing a cross-border joint review model by examining their respective accreditation mechanisms at the programme level, understanding the operational pattern and accreditation mechanisms and standards of two countries.

NCPA case

Since 2015 NCPA has implemented several joint accreditation projects together with 8 QAA partners from 6 countries. They are summarised in the table below.

Country	QAA partner
Belgium	Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen (AEC)
Belgium	Music Quality Enhancement: Foundation for Quality Enhancement and Accreditation in Higher Music Education (MusiQuE)
China	Education Quality Evaluation Agency of the Ministry of Education, P.R. China (EQEA)
Germany	Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN)
Germany	Evaluationsagentur Baden-Württemberg (EVALAG)
Kazakhstan	Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating of the Republic of Kazakhstan (IAAR)
Kyrgyz Republic	Independent Accreditation Agency «Bilim-Standart»
Taiwan	Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT)

Table 1

The participating agencies viewed joint accreditation as a very positive experience, beneficial to both HEIs and the agencies involved. Joint accreditation emerged as a valuable tool for fostering confidence in the quality of international education, potentially streamlining bureaucratic processes, and easing the burden on universities during programme evaluations. It serves to instill trust and recognition in the educational quality provided.

NCPA has been closely cooperating with EQEA (China) for 8 years. 68 educational programmes delivered by 7 Russian universities and 9 educational programmes delivered by 5 Chinese universities were accredited by NCPA and EQEA.

The key steps of joint accreditation will be clarified using the example of evaluation that is jointly carried out by EQEA and NCPA. The procedure starts with a bilateral agreement between the partner agencies, meticulous preparatory work, and a detailed account of all procedural issues: agreement and coordination of standards, methodological consulting and support of representatives of HEIs undergoing joint accreditation, a self-evaluation report prepared by the HEI undergoing accreditation, followed by a three-day site visit, after which the external review panel prepares an external review report based on the provided materials and the evidences observed onsite. The success of the evaluation exercise, its effectiveness and efficiency depend on the concerted effort and rapport of the external review panel.

However, there are a lot of challenges arising on the way. In the first place, it is the reluctance of the national education authorities to take into consideration the results of joint accreditation. They identify a threat to their influence on a HEI and try to rationalise their inaction by the argument that the standards of joint accreditation do not take into consideration national requirements and context.

Accreditation can be both mandatory and voluntary, but many institutions choose to seek accreditation as a way to demonstrate their commitment to quality education. It is important for students and parents to verify the accreditation status of any institution they consider entering in order to ensure the quality of education that students will receive there.

Benefits of Joint accreditation

1. Joint accreditation can gain wider recognition by boosting credibility, facilitating credit transfer, enhancing employability, creating networking opportunities, and ensuring quality assurance:

- Global Credibility: Accreditation from multiple international bodies adds credibility to the institution or programmes, making it more reputable on a global scale.

- Transferability of Credits: Accreditation by international bodies can facilitate easier transfer of credits between institutions worldwide, making it easier for students to continue their education in different countries.

- Employability: Graduates from accredited programmes are often more attractive to employers, both locally and internationally, as accreditation signifies that they have received education of good quality.

- Networking Opportunities: Through joint accreditation, institutions can establish partnerships with other accredited institutions globally, leading to collaborations, research opportunities, and exchange programmes that can further enhance their reputation.

- Quality Assurance: Joint accreditation ensures that universities and educational programmes meet certain quality standards that are recognised globally, reassuring stakeholders about the quality of education being provided.

- Cross-Border Collaboration: Joint accreditation bridges geographical boundaries and fosters collaboration between local and foreign QA agencies, promoting cultural exchange, diversity, and the sharing of best practices in education.

2. Joint accreditation can ease external quality assurance of joint degree programmes. In particular, it can:

- dismantle an important obstacle to the development of joint programmes by setting standards for these programmes that are based on the agreed tools, without applying additional national criteria, and

- facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes that genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character.

3. Joint accreditation can streamline the accreditation process, reducing the time and resources that QA team members spend.

4. Joint accreditation can help promoting quality culture by building knowledge and sharing experience when QA agencies learn with, from, and about each other to enable effective collaboration and improve QA in the local country.

- Sharing experiences allows institutions to learn from each other's successes and challenges, enabling them to adopt best practices in accreditation processes and standards; allows QAA agencies to learn from each other's successes and challenges, enabling them to adopt best practices in accreditation processes and standards, promoting continuous improvement, innovation, and the adoption of quality assurance measures that are relevant and effective in the context of cross-border educational collaborations.

- Harmonization of Standards: Collaborating on accreditation processes promotes the harmonization of standards across different countries, ensuring consistency and comparability in evaluating educational quality.

- Enhanced Transparency: Sharing experiences and knowledge promotes transparency in accreditation processes, helping to build trust among stakeholders and ensuring accountability in the evaluation of universities and study programmes.

- Cross-Cultural Understanding: Exchanging ideas and experiences enhances cross-cultural understanding among institutions, fostering a more inclusive and diverse approach to accreditation that considers various perspectives and contexts.

- Global Perspective: By building knowledge and sharing experiences internationally, universities can gain a global perspective on accreditation practices, enabling them to better adapt to the evolving landscape of higher education on a worldwide scale.

Conclusions

The paper may be of interest to universities that deliver joint programmes, national QA agencies, government bodies, and experts responsible for QA. Though joint accreditation is a relatively recent tool in the realm of higher education, it plays a crucial role in higher education by promoting collaboration between institutions and accrediting bodies to uphold the quality and standards of educational programmes. It facilitates the recognition and validation of joint degree programmes, encourages international cooperation, boosts student mobility, and instills confidence in the quality of education provided through global partnerships. Moreover, joint accreditation simplifies evaluation procedures, alleviates administrative complexities for institutions, and supports the ongoing enhancement of educational benchmarks.

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