

European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

INSIGHTS FROM VLUHR QA

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Introduction

Joint degree programmes have become important instruments for fostering academic mobility and institutional cooperation in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These programmes, jointly offered by higher education institutions (HEIs) from at least two countries, represent the operationalisation of Bologna goals in practice. Yet, the complexity of cross-border education, combined with diverse national QA and recognition systems, has historically hindered their implementation as well as a consistent quality assurance.

To address these challenges, the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA) was adopted in 2015 by EHEA ministers. It enables a single external QA procedure to be used for joint programmes, regardless of the national QA requirements of the partner countries. Based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), the EA promotes transparency, efficiency, and trust. It consists of nine interrelated standards, covering eligibility, learning outcomes, study programme, admission and recognition, learning, teaching and assessment, student support, resources, transparency and documentation, and quality assurance. Despite this unified framework, the implementation of the EA varies significantly across countries.

Purpose of the report

This report explores the common elements that emerge from the five EA peer reviews conducted by VLUHR QA between 2019 and 2025. While attention is paid to substantive findings concerning the quality of joint programmes, the primary focus is on the procedures themselves and on how

these procedures have been experienced by the various stakeholders involved. This report also reflects on potential obstacles and challenges within the current EA framework that could be addressed through the forthcoming revision of the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*, which is taking place alongside the revision of the ESG in 2027.

Methodology

The report draws on the experiences of VLUHR QA process coordinators and secretaries, as well as the external panel members who participated and the programme managers of the reviewed joint programmes. The latter two groups were consulted through an online survey following the completion of the review procedures.

To support reflection on the EA framework, VLUHR QA organised a reflection session on 15 January 2026 dedicated to the revision of the European Approach. During this meeting, participants exchanged experiences with the current EA framework and discussed possible improvements to the standards in light of the proposed ESG revisions. The participants of this session were all based in Flanders, and included former panel members, programme directors of joint programmes, quality assurance managers from higher education institutions, and colleagues from quality assurance agencies with experience in applying the European Approach.

This report further builds on the findings presented in the article [*A First Exploration of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*](#). It also draws inspiration from the research paper [*A Thematic Analysis of European Approach Joint Programme Reviews*](#), delivered by Beate Treml at the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) held in Budapest in November 2025.

Generative Artificial intelligence (AI) was used as a supporting tool during the preparation of this report. Firstly, it was used for language editing and text revision to improve clarity and readability. In addition, AI was employed to identify potential patterns and trends across the five public review reports. These AI-generated observations were subsequently compared with and validated against the findings of an independent human reading of the reports. All substantive analytical decisions, interpretation of the findings, and final editorial choices remained the responsibility of VLUHR QA. The use of AI in this study was consistent with the [*VLUHR QA AI policy*](#), that gives particular attention to human oversight, transparency, and data protection.

VLUHR QA

In Flanders (Belgium), policymakers and quality assurance agencies took immediate initiative to prepare the implementation of the EA. The framework was embedded in a Flemish decree that entered into force in September 2019. This decree stipulates that for certain programmes, including newly established programmes, evaluation according to the European Approach is mandatory. Joint programmes that, at the time, were already offered within an institution subject

to an institutional review were not required to undergo an additional evaluation under the European Approach.

Since 2019, VLUHR QA has been conducting reviews of joint programmes using the EA framework. In preparation of the launch of the first European Approach procedure, VLUHR QA developed its own Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. From the outset, the VLUHR QA Board meant for the manual to serve as a pilot instrument. Following the completion of the first European Approach review, a thorough revision was undertaken, resulting in the current version of the [manual](#), approved by the VLUHR QA Board in 2020. This evolution between the manuals was described in the article [A First Exploration of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes](#).

Since then, VLUHR QA has conducted five programme reviews using the European Approach. Four of these reviews involved a Flemish partner institution, while one did not. Four reviews concerned existing programmes, whereas one was carried out as part of an initial accreditation procedure. The latter resulted in a negative accreditation decision, while the others were approved by the VLUHR QA Board holding positive advice for accreditation. At the time of drafting this report, three additional European Approach review procedures conducted by VLUHR QA are still in progress. As these procedures have not yet been finalised, the findings and insights arising from them have not been taken into account in this report.

The five peer reviews reflect diversity in programme type, institutional maturity, disciplinary domain, and geographic partnership:

- [DocNomads](#) (2019): Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree in Documentary Film Directing jointly organised by Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, Budapest, Hungary; Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon, Portugal; LUCA School of Arts, Brussels, Belgium
- [MATA](#) (2021): Advanced Master of Arts in Transatlantic Affairs (MATA) jointly organised by College of Europe (Bruges, Belgium and Natolin, Poland) and The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University (Medford, greater Boston area, United States).
- [SINReM](#) (2023): International Master of Science in Sustainable and Innovative Natural Resource Management, jointly organised by Ghent University (Belgium), Technische Universität Bergakademie Freiberg (Germany) and Uppsala University (Sweden).
- [D4S](#) (2024): Master in Cybersecurity Management & Data Sovereignty, jointly organized by the DIGITAL4Security Consortium (D4S).
- [IMSOGLQ](#) (2026), International Master of Science in Soils and Global Change, jointly organized by Ghent University (Belgium), Aarhus University (Denmark), BOKU University/Universität für Bodenkultur Wien (Austria), and the University of Göttingen (Germany).

General findings across the five EA procedures.

The sections below present a number of findings based on the five EA procedures conducted by VLUHR QA. These findings are further complemented by input from stakeholders collected following the completion of the procedures and consulted in a dedicated session on the EA framework (see above). For each sub-standard, the sections below present the main findings. These include substantive observations, reflections on the current European Approach framework and the interpretation of its standards, as well as identified good practices, recurring challenges, and common pitfalls in its implementation.

Standard 1 – Eligibility

Standard 1.1 – Status of the Institutions

Across the five reviewed programmes, four programmes provide convincing evidence that the participating higher education institutions are legally recognised within their respective national higher education systems and possess the authority to jointly deliver programmes and jointly award degrees. In one review, the review panel could not verify that all participating institutions fulfilled the legal requirements to participate in the joint programme, resulting in non-compliance with the standard.

The evidence suggests that Standard 1.1 rarely constitutes a challenge for mature joint programmes. Where compliance with this substandard cannot be established, awarding an overall judgement of full compliance with the European Approach appears difficult to justify in practice.

Given its predominantly formal and legal nature, stakeholders suggest this substandard could be treated as a prerequisite to the review process and verified by the quality assurance agency before the external evaluation begins. A conditional compliance judgement, pending the fulfilment of the outstanding legal requirements, could provide a more proportionate outcome (see Observations on the current EA Framework below).

Standard 1.2 – Joint Design and Delivery

According to panel members and HEI's programme managers, this standard emerges as one of the strongest indicators of programme quality across all five cases. Successful programmes consistently demonstrate that jointness extends beyond mandatory student mobility or a shared diploma. Instead, jointness is embedded throughout the academic, organisational and pedagogical design of the programme.

While the consortium in one programme evaluated by VLUHR QA formally consisted of numerous partner institutions, the review panel concluded that genuine joint ownership of the curriculum and governance structures had not yet been fully established.

Standard 1.3 – Cooperation Agreement

This sub-standard clearly specifies what a cooperation agreement should contain. Most programmes address these elements comprehensively in their consortium agreement. As a result, for this sub-standard it is relatively easy to verify whether all the necessary formal requirements are in place. A comprehensive cooperation agreement could be seen as one of the defining characteristics of mature joint programmes. Rather than merely representing administrative compliance, it provides the governance framework that enables sustainable collaboration. Since the consortium agreement is intended to serve as the operational foundation of the consortium, it should be formally endorsed by the participating HEIs. Therefore, it can reasonably be expected that it is signed by the authorised representatives of all participating HEIs.

Given that the requirements of this sub-standard can be verified through a formal document check, stakeholders argue that compliance should be treated as a prerequisite to be assessed by the QA agency before the review process starts. However, the extent to which the consortium agreement is effectively implemented and embedded in practice should remain a matter for the review panel to assess.

Standard 2 – Learning Outcomes

Standard 2.1 – Level

Programmes need to demonstrate explicit alignment with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA), the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and relevant national qualifications frameworks.

Mapping the learning outcomes against the NQF is often perceived by programmes as an administrative burden, as many NQFs are variations of each other with strong similarities, given that they are based on the EQF. Demonstrating this alignment is therefore often regarded by programme managers as an administrative rather than a substantively relevant task. Due to the existence of [domain-specific learning outcomes in Flanders](#), it appears that Flemish programme managers may be more familiar with this type of exercise.

Standard 2.2 – Disciplinary Field

All reviewed programmes derive their academic identity from the complementary expertise of their partner institutions. Panels concluded that these programmes bring together the individual strengths and areas of expertise of the participating institutions into a single integrated programme.

Several of the programmes reviewed do not fit neatly within a single disciplinary field. Therefore, stakeholders argue this standard should not be interpreted too narrowly if its objective is to

acknowledge and assess the academic profile of joint programmes (see below). The reviewed programmes demonstrate that interdisciplinarity in joint programmes is most successful when it is based on genuine complementarity rather than a mere combination or duplication of expertise.

Standard 2.3 – Achievement of Learning Outcomes

Evidence of learning outcome achievement constitutes an extensively examined aspects across the reviews. Panels consistently rely on multiple sources of evidence, including assessment samples, master's theses, alumni surveys, graduate employment data, progression statistics, employer feedback, and interviews conducted during site visits. Stakeholders mention there are sometimes overlaps between standard 2.3 and standard 5.2 on assessment.

Standard 2.4 – Regulated Professions

This substandard was not applicable in any of the five reviewed programmes.

Standard 3 – Study Programme

Standard 3.1 – Curriculum

Among all European Approach standards, curriculum design provides perhaps the richest source of comparative insights. All five programmes demonstrate markedly different approaches to constitute an integrated joint curriculum. Nevertheless, most programmes present curricula that are explicitly designed around the complementary expertise of the consortium partners. Rather than assembling existing institutional courses, they have developed coherent learning trajectories in which mobility, disciplinary progression and research activities form an integrated educational experience.

Standard 3.2 – Credits

The application of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is present in all five programmes.

Standard 3.3 – Workload

The requirements of this standard are largely formal in nature. The standard also states that "the workload and the average time to complete the programme should be monitored". While the formal aspects of workload allocation and ECTS design are generally well established and adequately addressed by programmes, review panels also pay particular attention to whether programmes systematically monitor the workload actually experienced by students and the

average time required to complete the programme. Most panels pay particular attention to how this is addressed across the different institutions in the consortium and centrally monitored.

Standard 4 – Admission and Recognition

Standard 4.1 – Admission

Admission procedures are consistently identified as strengths across all five programmes. Transparent admission criteria, competitive international selection procedures and clearly communicated eligibility requirements contribute to attracting highly qualified student cohorts.

Particularly in Erasmus Mundus programmes admission procedures seem to extend beyond academic selection to include geographical diversity, gender balance and scholarship allocation. Across all cases, review panels consistently praise the accessibility of information provided to applicants and the support offered throughout the admission process.

Standard 4.2 – Recognition

Recognition procedures display strong consistency across the reviewed programmes. All programmes explicitly refer to the Lisbon Recognition Convention and demonstrate mechanisms for recognising prior qualifications and periods of study. How this works in practice, is not always very consistent amongst all reviews. Rather than focusing on formal compliance alone, panels assess whether recognition procedures facilitate international student mobility while maintaining academic standards.

Standard 5 – Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Standard 5.1 – Learning and Teaching

In general, the reviews demonstrate that joint programmes employ highly student-centred and internationally oriented teaching methods. Traditional lectures are often complemented by e.g. seminars, laboratory work, fieldwork, project-based learning, case studies and collaborative assignments.

A notable observation across the mature programmes is the integration of international diversity into pedagogical design. Rather than treating cultural diversity as a challenge, programmes deliberately exploit diverse student backgrounds as a learning resource, particularly in collaborative assignments and international group work.

Standard 5.2 – Assessment

All programmes have developed joint assessment frameworks, yet the reviews reveal that achieving genuine consistency across institutions remains challenging. Although common assessment forms and grading procedures have been introduced in some programmes, the

review panels sometimes observed differences in grading practices between partner universities. This finding illustrates that harmonising assessment procedures requires continuous academic dialogue rather than administrative standardisation alone.

Joint assessment seems to represent one of the most demanding aspects of implementing the European Approach. While common procedures are generally established, maintaining consistent academic standards across institutional cultures remains an ongoing developmental process.

Standard 6 – Student Support

All mature programmes evaluated within the EA framework by VLUHR QA, provide comprehensive support for internationally mobile students, including academic advising, administrative guidance, visa support, housing assistance and wellbeing services. Effective support systems combine central coordination with local implementation and recognise that academic success depends on both administrative efficiency and social integration.

Nevertheless, aligning the local administrative procedures of all partner institutions into coherent joint programme-level processes remains a significant challenge. Although considerable efforts are made to harmonise these procedures, practical issues related to visa applications and housing continue to represent persistent obstacles, even in well-established joint programmes that devote substantial attention and resources to student support.

Standard 7 – Resources

Standard 7.1 – Staff

All programmes benefit from highly qualified academic staff with strong international research profiles. Panels consistently commend the disciplinary expertise and commitment of teaching staff. Nevertheless, some review panels give attention to the fact that the staff from the various locations of the programme are not familiar with each other. This suggests that future development of joint programmes may focus more on strengthening collaboration among existing academic teams.

Standard 7.2 – Facilities

Most reviewed programmes consistently demonstrate access to high-quality physical and digital learning environments. Laboratories, research facilities, digital learning platforms and specialised equipment are generally regarded as strengths. Panels investigate how effectively resources are integrated into joint educational activities. The panels demand thorough actual insights in all facilities students are in touch with in the programme.

Standard 8 – Transparency and Documentation

Transparency represents one of the strongest performing standards across most reviews. Programme websites, student handbooks, course catalogues and publicly available documentation consistently provide comprehensive information regarding admission, curriculum, assessment and student support. Some programmes are commended specifically for the quality of their website, detailed course descriptions and comprehensive student handbooks, which together facilitate both transparency and student mobility.

Standard 9 – Quality Assurance

Based on the panel's conclusions, mature quality cultures appear to be characterised by regular programme evaluation, active stakeholder involvement and systematic enhancement. Standard 9 illustrates the transition from compliance-oriented quality assurance towards continuous enhancement and shared institutional learning.

Reflections from the Stakeholders

Reflections on the EA Framework

As mentioned above, VLUHR QA organised a reflection session on 15 January 2026. This session was dedicated to the revision of the European Approach. Participants exchanged experiences with the current EA framework and discussed possible improvements to the standards in light of the proposed ESG revisions. Participants, all based in Flanders, included former panel members, programme directors of joint programmes, quality assurance managers from higher education institutions, and colleagues from quality assurance agencies with experience in applying the European Approach.

Participants generally considered the current structure and overall framework of the European Approach to be clear and fit for purpose. Consequently, only limited modifications to the framework were deemed necessary. A recurring observation was that the standards should remain sufficiently broad to accommodate the diversity of joint programmes across the European Higher Education Area.

Participants noted that quality assurance agencies tend to interpret the European Approach standards in a largely consistent manner. However, differences may arise in the application of elements derived from Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG. While these variations were not generally perceived as problematic, representatives of higher education institutions indicated that greater alignment between agency practices could further enhance transparency and predictability.

The persistence of differing accreditation cycles across countries and regions was identified as a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of the European Approach.

The concept of "jointness" emerged as a key discussion point. Participants cautioned against an overly prescriptive definition and suggested that jointness should be assessed along a continuum rather than through a fixed set of criteria. The central consideration should be the existence of genuine joint decision-making structures. Review panels should be able to establish that the partners operate as a coherent team and have reached clear agreements regarding which aspects of the programme are organised jointly and which remain institution specific.

Finally, participants expressed concerns regarding the relationship between the forthcoming revision of the ESG and the European Approach. Several participants argued that a direct and comprehensive incorporation of all revised ESG elements, including the guidelines, into the European Approach could undermine its usability. In this regard, reference was made to the original 2015 European Approach, which was conceived not as a direct replication of the ESG, but as an interpretation specifically tailored to the context of joint programmes.

Participants suggested that Standards 1.1 and 1.3 could be considered prerequisites to be verified by the quality assurance agency. Regarding Standard 1.3, they stressed that internal quality assurance arrangements often evolve once a programme becomes operational. Requiring a fully detailed description in the consortium agreement may therefore be too restrictive, and more flexible arrangements, for example through appendices, were considered preferable.

For Standard 1.2, participants argued that greater emphasis should be placed on how jointness is implemented within the programme. In particular, the standard should assess whether the PDCA cycle and related decision-making processes are organised jointly across the consortium.

Participants noted a degree of overlap between Standards 2.1 and 2.2 and suggested considering their merger into a single standard assessing whether relevant learning outcomes are defined at the appropriate NQF level. Standard 2.3 was identified as less clear in terms of the evidence expected from programmes and its distinction from subsequent sub-standards. Some participants suggested reformulating the standard to focus more explicitly on programme coherence and the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

With regard to Standards 3.2 and 3.3, participants considered parts of these sub-standards to be rather formalistic. Some suggested treating certain elements as prerequisites and exploring the possibility of merging both standards.

Participants further suggested broadening Standard 7.1 in line with the proposed revisions of the ESG. Finally, while confirming the importance of stakeholder involvement under Standard 9, they emphasised that the focus should remain on stakeholders who are genuinely relevant to the programme.

Programme managers in the reflection sessions as well as through the VLUHR QA surveys identify the varying nature of the different substandards as one of the challenges of the European Approach. While some substandards are perceived as predominantly formal and almost checklist-like, others require a more reflective and analytical discussion in the self-evaluation report (SER). Programme managers acknowledge that finding the appropriate balance between these different types of substandards is challenging when writing the SER.

Panel members in the reflection sessions as well as through the VLUHR QA surveys express overall satisfaction with the European Approach framework. Most indicate that working with the EA framework is more straightforward and better suited to the evaluation of joint programmes than applying national accreditation frameworks. At the same time, the extent to which joint programmes are expected to harmonise procedures across all partner institutions remains a recurring point of discussion. Examples include enrolment procedures at all partner institutions, the use of different virtual learning environments, and the application of different national grading systems. Nevertheless, panel members indicate that the site visit interviews provide a comprehensive understanding of the programmes' level of jointness and its overall effectiveness, allowing them to assess these contextual differences appropriately.

Reflections on other aspects of the EA

Across the reviewed programmes, some recurring reflections emerged regarding the implementation of the European Approach. A frequently identified challenge was that not all countries involved recognised the European Approach as a framework for evaluation and accreditation, creating complications in aligning different national regulatory requirements. In addition, several consortia indicated that reaching consensus among partners on the importance of the external quality assurance process and securing the necessary resources to organise and finance it required considerable effort.

At the same time, programme managers identified significant benefits in working with the EA framework in preparation of an EA evaluation, as well as using the EA as a tool for internal reflection. This proved to be particularly valuable to them during the preparation of the self-evaluation report (SER), which not only served as a source of information for the review panel but also stimulated internal dialogue and critical self-reflection within the consortia. The preparation of the SER encouraged partners to reassess existing practices, identify areas requiring further analysis, and develop solutions to previously identified shortcomings. According to programme managers, the review process therefore acted as a catalyst for quality enhancement rather than merely an accountability exercise.

Concluding reflections

Observations on common strengths and challenges of the reviewed joint programmes

Across the reviewed European Approach procedures, several recurring observations emerged regarding the strengths and challenges of joint programmes.

A consistent strength of successful programmes is their strong commitment to the principle of jointness. Programmes in which collaboration was embedded from the outset typically demonstrated genuine academic integration through jointly designed curricula, shared teaching responsibilities, coordinated governance, and joint degree awarding. This level of integration not only strengthened the academic coherence of the programmes, but also fostered trust among consortium partners and other stakeholders.

The reviewed programmes also show that quality assurance is most effective when it is embedded in a reflective quality culture. Programmes that systematically involve students, alumni, employers, and other external stakeholders in monitoring and enhancement activities are better positioned to use quality assurance as a driver for continuous improvement rather than solely as a mechanism for demonstrating compliance with external standards.

Another common characteristic is a clear student-centred approach. Well-developed programmes organise student mobility, academic support, and assessment in an integrated manner, ensuring that these elements contribute directly to the intended learning experience. In this context, mobility is treated not merely as an administrative requirement but as a pedagogical component that adds value to students' academic and intercultural development.

Transparency and effective communication likewise emerged as important success factors. Clear, accessible, and consistent information regarding programme structure, mobility pathways, curriculum, assessment, and student support enables all partners and stakeholders to work from a shared understanding and contributes to a positive student experience.

At the same time, several recurring challenges were identified. One concerns the legal and institutional framework within which joint programmes operate. Even where a programme complies with the European Approach, national legal requirements, institutional recognition, or degree-awarding arrangements may still create obstacles to implementation and recognition.

Quality assurance arrangements also remain a point of attention. Where responsibilities for quality assurance are insufficiently coordinated across partner institutions, this may lead to fragmented processes, duplication of effort, and limited opportunities to collect and analyse consortium-wide evidence for enhancement. Establishing joint quality assurance mechanisms therefore remains an important area for development.

Finally, several reviews highlighted the importance of ensuring that staffing capacity, financial resources, and institutional infrastructure evolve in line with programme ambitions. This is particularly relevant for programmes experiencing rapid growth or involving complex delivery models across multiple institutions. Sustainable resource planning is therefore essential to safeguard programme quality over time.

Observations on the current EA framework

The EA framework proves sufficiently flexible to accommodate programmes from diverse disciplinary fields while maintaining a consistent evaluation structure. Only limited refinements appear necessary to further strengthen the framework.

One main observation concerns the varying nature of the substandards. While several substandards require in-depth qualitative analysis and expert judgement, others are primarily formal or legal in nature. These formal substandards could be treated as prerequisites that are verified by the quality assurance agency before the external review process starts. Such an approach would prevent review panels from conducting site visits for programmes that do not meet essential legal or procedural requirements, thereby reducing the administrative burden and making more efficient use of resources for both the programme and the quality assurance agency. In addition, some of the more formal substandards could be merged, as they address closely related aspects of programme eligibility and governance.

The framework could equally serve as a reference framework for the internal quality assurance of joint programmes. This would further strengthen quality enhancement throughout the programme lifecycle and encourage institutions to use the European Approach as a continuous quality management instrument rather than solely as an accreditation framework.

Finally, greater alignment and systematic exchange of expertise between quality assurance agencies conducting European Approach reviews would further enhance the consistency of review practices. Although the framework provides common standards, agencies inevitably develop different interpretations and review practices over time. Increased sharing of good practices among agencies could contribute to greater consistency in the application of the framework while preserving the flexibility that characterises the European Approach.

Nevertheless, the European Approach is seen as more than a common framework for quality assurance. By bringing partners and quality assurance systems together across national borders, it facilitates transnational cooperation, build mutual trust and help remove barriers to the development and recognition of joint programmes. In this way, it is a strong tool in achieving Bologna commitments.