

## A FIRST EXPLORATION OF THE 'EUROPEAN APPROACH FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE OF JOINT PROGRAMMES'

Patrick Van den Bosch (VLUHR QA), Roel Vande Winkel (KU Leuven, LUCA School of Arts)

### Flanders explores the European Approach.

The 'European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes' has been in existence for four years now. It has been approved by EHEA ministers in May 2015. However, the 'European Approach' is still unknown in many countries, regions and by many Higher education Institutions (HEI). Nevertheless, the European Approach offers numerous opportunities for the external evaluation of Joint Programmes across national borders. In particular, it will: *'dismantle an important obstacle to the development of joint programmes by setting standards for these programmes that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria, and facilitate integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes that genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character'*<sup>1</sup>.

In Flanders (Belgium), policy makers and quality assurance agencies have taken the initiative to implement the European Approach. Since 2015, Flanders has shifted its quality assurance system from programme evaluation to mainly institutional evaluation. This system was shaped in a new decree (law) that entered into force in September 2019. For some programmes, including new programmes, evaluation according to the European Approach is compulsory. Joint programmes that already function within an institutional review are not obliged to do so. This new decree takes into account the decision of the EHEA ministers in Yerevan in 2015. The decree mentions explicitly that *'Joint programmes, which are organised by a Flemish higher education institution together with one or more foreign higher education institutions and which, upon successful completion, lead to a joint diploma [...] are assessed on the basis of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, approved by the ministers of the European Higher Education Area.'*<sup>2</sup>

### VLUHR QA embraces the European Approach

Some HEI in Flanders were somehow hesitant about the decision to enshrine the European Approach in the decree. Some HEI are of the opinion that they should be responsible to choose how to guarantee the quality of each of their programmes within the system of institutional evaluation. In order to make Flemish HEI more familiar with the European Approach, VLUHR QA organised a seminar for them in March 2019 and again in October 2019. On the basis of the survey carried out among those present at the first seminar, it appears that most attendants find the European Approach to be a useful tool. In this way, the evaluation of the quality of the courses offered by the foreign partners can be better guaranteed. In addition to this overall positive finding, there were two recurrent remarks. The first remark concerns the implementation of European Approach in the whole EHEA. A second remark concerns the European Approach framework. The framework seems to be considered more binding and checking than the appreciative approach that has characterised the Flemish approach to programme evaluations over the past 6 years. These concerns were

<sup>1</sup> Agreed standards European Approach (20/07/2019) <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/agreed-standards/>

<sup>2</sup> Flemish decree (20/07/2019) <http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/pfile?id=1398899>

also expressed by the VLUHR QA team at the start of the first programme evaluation according to European Approach. However, the first experience with European Approach would greatly reduce these concerns.

VLUHR QA decided to draw up its own 'Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. From the start of the design of the manual, the VLUHR QA Board made it clear that this manual would be used as a pilot. This was explicitly communicated to all stakeholders, including the DocNomads programme that would be the first evaluated according to this manual. This left room for more experimentation and an open(minded) procedural approach. This avoids the manual to contain too many strict procedural rules that would be more difficult to apply in a broader European context.

An important advantage of VLUHR QA is that it is not an accreditation body. This gives VLUHR QA a wider possibility than quality assurance agencies to not have to take into account national provisions of a particular country or region. The VLUHR QA manual therefore does not tend to take into account purely local legislation or customs. It gives VLUHR QA the advantage of being able to fit into the whole EHEA.

In drawing up this manual, VLUHR QA based itself on (1) the European Approach Framework approved in Yerevan, (2) the procedural requirements of the VLUHR QA manual for Flemish programmes and (3) new insights.

The framework for the European Approach, as decided in 2015, determines some procedural aspects in line with the ESG. These include requirements on the self-evaluation report, the review panel, the site visit and the review report. These requirements can be seen as minimum requirements and thus allow the quality assurance agency to develop its own emphases.

### New insights from stakeholders

In the development of its manual, VLUHR QA has not only looked at the first experiences of other quality assurance agencies. All its stakeholders were directly or indirectly involved. Indirectly, this was done by taking full account of the comments resulting from the annual surveys of both evaluated programmes, institutions and panel members when drafting the manual for the European Approach.

The main stakeholders are directly represented in the Advisory Council: the universities of applied sciences and arts, the universities and the students. Their recommendations were presented to the QA Board. In addition, the expertise of NVAO colleagues was also used to critically reflect on the manual. The whole process, including consulting stakeholders, took six months. The VLUHR QA Board ratified the manual in June 2018.

While the first evaluation was conducted according to the European Approach, quality assurance staff of institutions and heads of joint programmes were invited to a seminar. As mentioned earlier, this meeting made them more familiar with the European Approach. In addition, the manual was discussed in several working groups. The results of these working groups are taken into account when drawing up a final manual in summer 2019. The final draft for this adjusted manual is discussed in a second seminar in October 2019, before final ratification by the QA Board.

New procedures: looking for efficiency and flexibility.

VLUHR QA set out a number of principles: focus on jointness by involving all partners in the programmes consortium, involving national accreditation organisations, a tailor made approach for each assessment and a lean and efficient procedural system.

Several questions arose in relation to the SER. These dealt with practical aspects including the length of an SER. After all, VLUHR QA absolutely wants to avoid drowning the panel in an overly extensive SER. However, VLUHR QA also wants to give the programme the opportunity to sufficiently tell the common story of the joint programme. In the manual it was advised that the programme should draw a SER that is preferably a maximum of 25,000 words in length, including the introduction and excluding the appendices. After the first evaluation according to the European Approach, it appears that this number may be too limited for programmes that are organised on many locations.

Contrary to the manual used by VLUHR QA for regular programmes, this manual does not stipulate which appendices are required to be added to the SER or which the panel must at least examine during the site visit. VLUHR QA chooses to look together with the programme management which appendices are necessary or desirable so that the panel can assess each standard of that specific programme. This ensures that VLUHR QA is able to tailor the programme to the specific needs of each assessment.

Another aspect that needs more attention than in the past is the explicit focus on the 'jointness'. VLUHR QA therefore considers it essential that at the start of the evaluation procedure all those responsible for each location of the programme are involved. Therefore, VLUHR QA organises an information meeting for all partners of the joint programme, preferably one year before the final submission date of the SER. More detailed information is provided at this meeting on the structure and progress of a programme assessment. This meeting also includes a detailed discussion of the internal review and the specificities of the programme and the specificities of the national higher education systems.

To compose a panel, VLUHR QA has for many years a solid procedure which is appreciated by its stakeholders. In addition to the procedure used by VLUHR QA, the minimum provision of the European Approach framework has been taken into account: The panel should include members from at least two countries involved in the consortium providing the programme. To guarantee the authority, independence and expertise of the panel, a procedure has been developed whereby different bodies make an active contribution to the process independently of each other: The programme to be assessed that proposes candidates; the VLUHR QA Board that evaluates the proposals, the appointed chairperson of the panel who has a say in the further composition of the panel and again the QA Board that finally decides on the panel composition. VLUHR QA can, before making a final decision on the composition of the assessment panel, submit the proposal to the relevant accreditation bodies for an opinion. This could strengthen the involvement of the accreditation bodies in the countries in which the programme operates.

For each standard the panel expresses a considered and substantiated opinion, according to a three-point scale: compliant, partially compliant or non-compliant. The opinions are supported by facts and analyses as far as possible and make use of illustrative and representative examples where possible. Since 2015 VLUHR QA explicitly chose to use a two-point scale (insufficient - sufficient) in its assessment of regular programmes. Such a pass/fail system forces both the assessment panels and the programme to focus in an assessment and the resulting report - as soon as the minimum quality threshold has been reached - on the

content rather than on the formal aspects (such as scoring) of the assessment. After advice from one of the stakeholders and after examining the accreditation procedures in some other European countries, VLUHR QA decided to work for its European Approach assessment with a three-point scale and to add 'partially compliant' to the assessment scale. The reason for this is to ensure that programmes that may not be fully compliant with the standard, but are still on the right track, would not be sanctioned. After all, in some countries a 'non-compliant' on a standard leads to a negative accreditation decision without the possibility of a re-assessment.

VLUHR QA developed a follow-up procedure in which the programme will provide information on how it acted upon the recommendations of the assessment panel. Subsequently, there is a meeting between programme managers and a member of the assessment panel, preferably the chairman. This interview leads to a concise report that is ratified by the VLUHR QA Board. The report is then published on the website. Programmes which already conduct a consistent follow-up at the request of an accreditation organisation, are requested to provide VLUHR QA with the results of this follow-up. This will be ratified by the VLUHR QA Board. The follow-up does not involve any additional costs for the programme.

### DocNomads: a testimonial of the first experience with the European Approach.

The “DocNomads Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree in Documentary Filmmaking” (hereafter DocNomads) is a two-year, full time, international graduate programme (120 ECTS) delivered by a consortium of three partner universities: Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem (University of Theatre and Film Arts), Budapest, Hungary; Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon, Portugal and LUCA School of Arts, Brussels, Belgium.

In April 2018, VLUHR QA had a meeting with LUCA staff members, who were presented with a choice. To fulfil its legal obligation to be accredited in Flanders (Belgium) LUCA could enter the national Flemish accreditation (programme assessment) procedure or it could accept the new and therefore more experimental ‘European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes’. LUCA decided that the second option served the interests of the international DocNomads programme better. The Hungarian and Portuguese partners agreed that this was the better option. It is their hope that the results of such a “European Approach” will, in the future, also be recognised by their national quality assurance agencies.

During the next board meeting in June 2018, staff members of the three partner universities had a meeting with VLUHR QA, who introduced them to the recently finished VLUHR Manual. The partner universities discussed the topic again at the next meeting of their Academic Board, in Lisbon (September 2018), where they also drafted a list of names of possible candidate members and a list of possible candidate chairs. Meanwhile preparations were being made for the SER. The partner institutions also agreed to contribute financially to this procedure.

As a first step, DocNomads submitted, in December 2018, a lengthy SER (32.000 words, accompanied by approx. 300 attachments). The SER and its attachments were analysed by panel that also paid an “on site” visit to the DocNomads programme. They visited the LUCA campus in Brussels. They were, however, assessing the entire programme, including the semesters organised in Portugal and in Hungary. For this reason, seven DocNomads staff members from the partner universities flew to Brussels and were interviewed by the panel. The panel also interviewed students, as well as alumni and external stakeholders, such as

documentary professionals who are not involved in the programme. On the last day of the visit, the panel gave an oral presentation, outlining its findings. The panel made a positive recommendation to the relevant accreditation bodies to grant accreditation. The final report was published on July 9, 2019.<sup>3</sup>

The DocNomads consortium identified some weaknesses and difficulties. Firstly, not all countries involved recognise the ‘European Approach’ as a framework for evaluation and accreditation. This creates difficulties regarding the current regulatory framework (for instance: “domain-specific learning outcomes” are not validated in each country, or at least not in the same manner). Secondly, there was the “need” to organise and finance this enterprise. It took some time for the three consortium partners to reach consensus about the fact that this external quality assessment procedure was important to all partners, in other words that it was not just a “Belgian” problem the Belgian partner had to deal with.

The DocNomads consortium identified also some strengths and opportunities. DocNomads invested and invests a lot of energy in time-consuming meetings, where all aspects of the programme are discussed and re-evaluated at least once a year. The DocNomads programme also made sure to make such information available to students, through its website and through its student contract<sup>4</sup>. Last but not least, the programme takes internal quality assessment very serious, asks the students to evaluate each semester and makes changes if need be. All of this proved very valuable when writing the SER. The VLUHR QA manual mentions that the SER has a dual purpose: On the one hand as a primary information source for the panel in assessing the programme, and the other hand the process of preparing for and writing the SER is also intended to stimulate internal consultation within the programme and thus its own internal quality assurance. The latter certainly applies to DocNomads. Preparing and writing this report not only stimulated internal consultation but also inspired the Academic Board to re-evaluate and re-think many aspects of the programme. Sometimes, it made the consortium partners realise that particular aspects need to be analysed or assessed in more detail and/or in more formal ways than has been done so far. The SER addressed such shortcomings openly and self-critically. Meanwhile, the consortium partners took these matters at heart and tried to find potential solutions that were presented to the panel during the site visit. The panel found that the DocNomads programme had indeed found an acceptable answer to the detected problems.

In retrospect, LUCA, the consortium partner which had to apply for external quality assessment in order to fulfil its legal obligation to be accredited (in Belgium/Flanders), is very happy with its decision to apply for the European Approach. Organising a European Joint Master Degree is a difficult enterprise, because one needs to take into account the legal obligations that apply in three different countries. Sometimes those legal frameworks are not fully compatible. By consequence, the academic partners have to be creative and find solutions. Sometimes those solutions respect the spirit, but not the letter of the education regulation of one specific partner university or its home country. The European Approach, leaves more margin for taking into account the specificities of an international programme than a national framework does.

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<sup>3</sup> Published report DocNomads (20/07/2019) [www.vluhr.be/docnomads](http://www.vluhr.be/docnomads)

<sup>4</sup> The student contract is an annually revised document that describes the mutual rights and obligations of the students and the partner universities of the DocNomads consortium.

## Lessons learned

The first experience with the European Approach has been a very positive one for both VLUHR QA and DocNomads. The adjustments to the current provisional VLUHR QA manual to a final manual will be limited: on the one hand, the new manual will give the programme some additional tools for writing the SER, on the other hand, VLUHR QA will make an even stronger effort to reduce the administrative burden of the assessment procedure to a minimum.

Due to the fact that the European Approach is anchored in Flanders by decree, some joint programmes will be compulsory evaluated via the European Approach in the coming years. However, the anchoring of the European Approach in different countries continues to be too slow, which is an obstacle to its application. VLUHR QA wants to encourage its fellow quality assurance agencies and the authorities to apply the European Approach. DocNomads has also become a strong supporter of European Approach in the international forum of EMJMDs.

*More information can be found on [www.europeanapproach.be](http://www.europeanapproach.be)*