

Report on HERE Seminar

Joint programmes and degrees: Strategy, management, implementation

University of Novi Sad, Serbia, 17-18 March 2016

First two sessions on joint programmes and degrees offered mutual understanding of what are they and what are they good for, than on different forms of cooperation with different implications. The distinguishing feature of this type of international collaborative program is that only one qualification is awarded jointly by the cooperating institutions. The duration of the program is normally not extended and thus students have the advantage of completing a joint program in the same time period as an individual program from one of the institutions. The design and integration of the course of study varies from program to program, but it normally involves the mobility (physical or virtual) of students, professors and/or course content. It is important to emphasize that students travelling to the partner country for research or course work is not a requirement in all joint degrees programs. Visiting professors, distance courses and joint virtual research projects are options that provide valuable alternatives to student mobility.

Development of joint programmes: partnership, curricula design, coordination, mobility (including credit award and grading). Awarding a joint qualification can face many legal issues. National regulations often do not allow for a university to jointly confer a qualification, especially in association with a foreign institution. In this case, if both names of the collaborating institutions appear on the degree certificate, there is a risk that the joint degree will not be recognized by either of the host countries, meaning that the student does not have a legitimate qualification even though all program requirements have been completed. For many academics and policy makers joint degree programs are welcomed as a natural extension of exchange and mobility programs. For others, they are perceived as a troublesome development leading to double counting of academic work and the thin edge of academic fraud.

Very interesting case study and presentations on joint programmes in times of digital provision have been delivered by colleague Tim Deprez from University of Ghent. Innovative ways to circumvent this problem have been developed by organizers of joint degree programs. Overall, the most important features of a joint degree program are the strengths that each institution brings to the program and the opportunities it allows for students to benefit from a program that draws on the teaching, curricular and research expertise of two or more institutions. A broad range of reactions exist due to the diversity of program models; the involvement of new (bona fide and rogue) and traditional providers; the uncertainty related to quality assurance and qualifications recognition; and finally, the ethics involved in deciding what academic workload or new competencies are required for the granting of a joint or double degree.

Second day of the seminar was mostly devoted to the issue of quality assurance of joint programmes and degrees. Quality assurance and accreditation are of

fundamental importance but pose significant challenges for joint degree programs. When institutions have internal quality assurance procedures in place, quality review requirements for their own components can be met. But, it is more difficult to assure the quality of courses offered by a partner university. Common entrance and exit requirements are often used as quality proxies, but it would be helpful if mutual recognition of respective quality assurance programs (where they exist) were included in the agreement for a collaborative program. Accreditation is even more of a challenge, as national systems do not exist in all countries around the world. Where they do exist, an added challenge is that accreditation agencies differ enormously; some focus on programs and others on institutions, some focus on inputs and others on processes or outputs. Furthermore, the establishment of procedures for accrediting international collaborative programs is relatively new territory for many agencies.

Joint programmes and strategic internationalisation (institutional investment in JPs, role of leadership, evaluating impact, spin-off cooperation and wider strategic partnerships) was the second topic of day 2. The benefits of joint programs are many and diverse, but so are the challenges that face the collaborating institutions involved in establishing these types of initiatives. Different regulatory systems, academic calendars, credit systems, tuition and scholarship schemes, teaching approaches and examination requirements are only a few of the more technical challenges that need to be surmounted.

The financial investment required to launch these kinds of programs is a subject worthy of further investigation and that was the issue discussed several times during both seminar days. In some cases, the bulk of the extra costs can be borne by increasing student tuition fees, which in turn makes the program quite elitist and only available to financially independent or supported students. In other situations, costs are absorbed by the institutions.

In Podgorica, March 25th, 2016.

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