

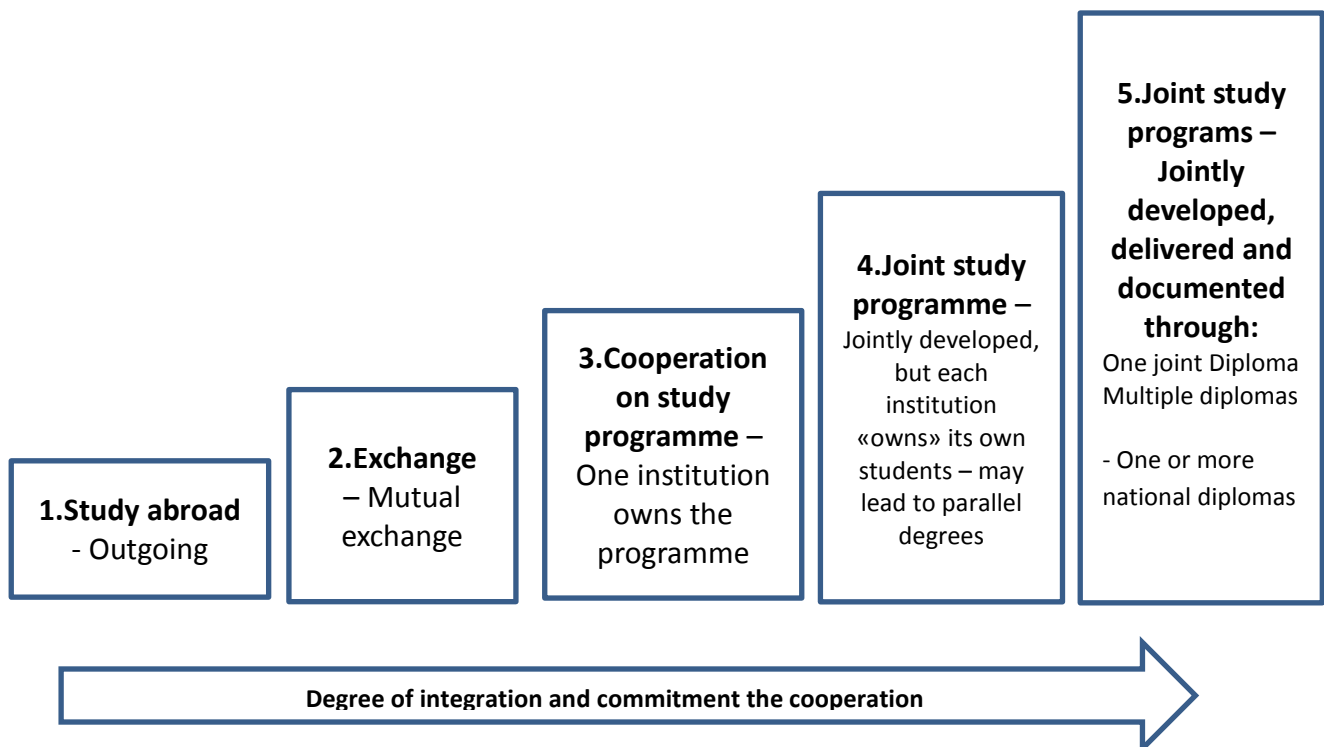
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Joint degree programs - instruments for quality enhancement!**

Joint degrees are regarded as the ultimate goal with regard to educational cooperation between institutions. And while there may be many arguments behind a decision to pursue a joint degree cooperation project from various stakeholders (rectorate, ministry, EU Commission etc), the main driver should always be: Quality enhancement!

Joint programs have been high on the agenda for about a decade. For European institutions, the major driver has without doubt been Erasmus Mundus (2004-2013 – now Erasmus+ Joint Master Degrees), which has supported more than 200 cooperation programs at master’s and PhD level, but similar activities are on the agenda also in other parts of the world. In the context of internationalisation of education, joint programs have been seen as a very important tool, and have been highlighted both in the Bologna Process and by the European Union.

International cooperation may take on many forms and include different levels of cooperation. Cooperation on study programs may contain different levels of “jointness”, where the most ambitious level is a Joint Degree Program. However, a joint degree is not the only path to happiness, and it is important that institutions try to determine the right level of cooperation in a given situation. Is it a new relationship or is it time to take the cooperation a step further? Are we ready and willing to give what it takes?

To achieve a successful international cooperation, it is of high importance that the level of ambition corresponds to reality with regard to background, available resources etc. Relations between institutions need to be built on trust and confidence, which take time to establish and build. Moreover, such relations should have a long term perspective and should therefore be built gradually, even if there are high ambitions for the cooperation. Below you will find an attempt to categorize international cooperation into various levels of commitment.



Re 1:

This option does not really require a mutual institutional agreement, although there will normally be some kind of agreement behind it. The main objective here is that the student will have his/her examinations recognized upon returning to the home institution, and this process will be far easier if there is already a contact between the home and host institution.

Re 2:

This option may be very general, and merely a reciprocal variation of 1). However, there may also be an agreement behind it, specifying number of students (and staff) involved, with a focus on certain subject areas etc. If the latter option is the case, the institutions will already have encountered some of the challenges concerning cooperation. (see below)

Re 3: The arguments for collaborating on joint programmes are many, of which only a few will be mentioned here. No institution can be self-contained in all subject areas and levels, therefore collaboration may offer an opportunity to specialize or to offer programs that combine elements from different areas, transversal studies, f i Environmental studies. In the simplest form the program is owned by one of the institutions, even though both offer elements into the program. Another reason may be that one of the partners needs to build capacity within an area, and thus are not able to give a full program in the field..

Re 4: The crucial point in a joint programme is that it is developed collaboratively by the partners. However, how the programme is documented, that is what type of degree it leads to and what type of diploma(s) candidates receive, is another matter. There are several options with regard to this, partly due to real obstacles of legal and administrative kinds (although the actual obstacles are fewer than one thinks), Joint, Double, Multiple diplomas, and even, according to the Lisbon convention, just one national diploma. But in this context, the type of diploma is not important, the important thing is that it is jointly developed and jointly run. Be aware that there are numerous study programs which are called joint, double, dual etc, but where the essence is that students are exchanged between two similar, already existing programs. Often the candidates receive diplomas for two programmes, even though in reality they have taken one. This is NOT what is meant by joint programmes!

Re 5: The final option, the “true” joint degree, is where a programme is jointly developed, jointly delivered and the candidates receive one joint diploma. The rationale behind the joint diploma is that as all parties have taken part in the development and the running of the programme and all parts are recognized by all partners, it seems reasonable to sign the documentation together. But again, the form of documentation is not the most important element, **the jointness of the program is!**

So while cooperation may take on many forms, a joint degree programme should have as its basis that it is at least “a jointly planned and developed programme, including a strong integration of both curricula and organisation”. This is and should be the absolute essence of the joint degree.

Some advantages of Joint programmes:

- Quality enhancement in the institutions
- Wider range of options for the students
- Options for specialization in the institutions
- Opportunity for transversal programmer
- Strong institutional commitment needed

Some challenges of Joint programmes:

- ⇒ Much work in implementing and running
- ⇒ Extra resources are needed
- ⇒ Different administrative systems, academic calendars, examination procedures etc. etc.

But all, or most of these challenges can be resolved if there is will and commitment, trust and confidence between the partners.

Much attention has been given to the documentation with regard to the degree(s) that are given to the candidates on the completion of the programme. According to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the documentation may take on three main forms,

- One joint diploma signed by all participating institutions
- Two or more diplomas signed by the relevant institutions with regard to a particular candidate
- (Both categories may be assisted by national diplomas)
- One or more national diplomas.

(Please note that within the Erasmus+ Joint Master Degrees, only the first two options are listed)

But while much focus has been put on the diplomas, the essence of the cooperation should be the “jointness” of the programme. Many countries have legislation which may complicate these issues to some degree, but will normally not hinder the cooperation as such. At least this is the case for European countries.

Golden rules – still shining!

In developing cooperation for a future joint degree, there are quite a few places to learn how to go about it, but one of the first guidelines still holds its position in pointing out simple and clear recommendations – EUAs 10 Golden rules:

- 1 Know why you are setting up the programme
- 2 Choose your partners carefully
- 3 Develop well-defined programme goals and student-learning outcomes with your network partners
- 4 Make sure that all the institutions (and not just academic colleagues) fully support the goals and objectives of the programme
- 5 Ensure that sufficient academic and administrative staff resources are involved in the programme
- 6 Ensure that a sustainable funding strategy for the programme is in place
- 7 Take care that information about the programme is easily accessible to students
- 8 Organise and plan sufficient meetings in advance
- 9 Develop language policy and encourage local language learning
- 10 Decide who is responsible for what

So why should you aim for a joint programme?

Because Joint degrees enhances quality.

While it must be admitted that joint degrees are resource demanding and many projects struggle with establishing sustainable structures, the experiences reported are almost uniform with regard to acknowledging the importance of the cooperation for quality enhancement in the institutions and the subject area in question. Quality enhancement should therefore be considered as the main driver for cooperation about a joint degree.

There are many sources of support and information about joint degrees. The EUA report has been mentioned, and Joiman (from which the above illustration has been taken). A comprehensive overview of resources can be found in JDAZ (Joint Degrees from A to Z), which will be published in 2015.

Good luck with your Joint degree!