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Prior to her current role, she amassed significant experience in quality assurance. She actively participated in various TEMPUS and ERASMUS+ projects and has closely cooperated with the Armenian quality assurance agency (ANQA). Additionally, she has enhanced her professional acumen through numerous specialised training courses, further cementing her role as a key contributor to the academic community. Her extensive background in these areas underscores her commitment to educational excellence and institutional development.

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Paper

Title: What are the prospects of joint evaluation procedures for joint universities? A case study of the evaluation of the French University in Armenia.

Abstract

Quality assurance of transnational education is a topic that has recently gained prominence and has been placed on the agenda of the 2024 ministerial communiqué of the Bologna follow-up group. The quality of transnational education raises the question of how to strike the right balance between the need for the external quality assurance procedures of the sending country to be adapted to the local context of the hosting country, while at the same time ensuring that it is based on the same requirements as national procedures in the sending country.

Joint universities are a particular form of transnational education resulting from cooperation between higher education institutions and requiring a collaborative form of quality assurance provision. The French University in Armenia (UFAR), as an intergovernmental university offering dual degrees recognised in both France and Armenia, requested a joint external evaluation in 2023 by the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres – France) and the Armenian agency (ANQA). This paper discusses the main implications for the external quality assurance of joint universities through the example of the *ad hoc* procedure that was carried out at UFAR in a fit-for-purpose approach which attempted to accommodate the distinct needs of both French and Armenian

accreditation requirements. It focuses on the French part of the evaluation, including the dialogue between UFAR and the French government. The paper also provides space for dialogue between external and internal quality assurance provisions, in order to provide key insights into how inter-agency cooperation can support the quality assurance of joint universities.

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Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) has been the subject of increasing political attention since the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in 2022 called for stricter regulation to protect the interests of students participating in transnational education programmes. In a recent study (Gover & Blackstock, 2023), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) identified three avenues to support transparent quality assurance (QA) of TNE: more information sharing; ensuring that quality assurance agencies and national authorities have clear guidelines for TNE and that institutions clearly explain how they are externally evaluated; and using existing tools and guidelines for the quality assurance of TNE, including the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The type of TNE considered in this article, namely joint universities, also known as intergovernmental universities or binational universities, echoes ENQA's recommendations. Could fostered cooperation between ESG-compliant quality assurance agencies be a way forward to evaluate joint universities?

This article presents the French approach to QA of joint universities through the case study of the French University in Armenia (UFAR), which was jointly evaluated by the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres – France) and the National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation (ANQA – Armenia) in 2023-2024. The article relies on an empirical approach complemented by relevant literature. After presenting the opportunities offered by joint universities and Hcéres procedures for the external QA of these institutions, the article explores the benefits and challenges of joint evaluations from the perspective of both the university and the agency of the foreign founding country, using the joint evaluation of UFAR as a case study.

1) Quality assurance of joint universities, a growing concern in the French context

A joint university is an independent higher education institution founded through collaboration between foreign higher education institutions (HEIs) and governments and host country institutions or governments (Knight, 2017). The first international joint university was founded in Cairo by Germany and Egypt (Knight & Simpson, 2022) but there are no single partnership nor funding models for these types of universities. On top of following geopolitical strategies, such joint universities can be used as "lighthouse institutions" and internationalise the universities of the sending country (Knight, 2017) while it can provide internationalisation at home, combat brain drain and answer the needs of the local community in the host countries.

"Franco-X university" is the umbrella term used in France to define an institution created by an intergovernmental agreement. 42 universities of this type have been created such as Galatasaray University in Turkey or the French-South African Institute of Technology. Depending on the initial intergovernmental agreement, awarded degrees can take the form of French degrees, double or

degrees or single degrees delivered exclusively by the newly founded structure. Therefore, the notion of co-construction and participation of both parties is consubstantial with that of the “Franco-X university”. The French side is expected to support the newly created institution in the form of direct funding, by sending international technical experts and/or academics. A consortium of French universities collaborates to establish new programmes and policies abroad.

A recent report commissioned by the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research (Euzet, 2024) has revealed new insights into the potential of Franco-X in enhancing the geo-strategic positioning and scientific influence of French higher education, especially when they are aimed at the Global South. Nevertheless, the same report has identified several challenges faced by Franco-X, including the concise nature of the initial intergovernmental agreements, a lack of prior reflection on the economic model and a lack of precision in the respective roles of the various stakeholders involved. As regards QA, the report wishes that Hcéres could play a more prominent role in the project design, support and monitoring.

2) External quality assurance of joint universities by Hcéres

Hcéres' missions are listed in article L114-3-1 of the Research Code and although they do include the external evaluation of HEIs, joint universities which issue French degrees with a French partner HEI are not specifically mentioned. These evaluations are therefore carried out on a voluntary basis, upon request of the university. To this date, three joint universities have been evaluated, at the institutional level: the French University of Egypt (2021), the Hanoi University of Science and Technology (2023) and the French University in Armenia (2024). For all its cross-border QA activities, including institutional reviews of joint universities, Hcéres relies on the expertise of its Europe and International Department. The department uses an adapted version of the French standards and guidelines for institutional reviews, which has been stripped of references to the French higher education and research system. While compliant with the ESG, Hcéres standards go beyond and have the specificity to embrace a holistic approach to evaluation. Since the standards look at the continuum between the strategy of the HEIs, the resources used to implement it and at the results of such actions, it is assumed that this approach fits other national contexts. The formal outcome of the procedure, if successful, is the award of the Hcéres quality label.

On top of that, Hcéres' Departments for programme and institutional reviews indirectly evaluate some of the activities taking place in joint universities including a French partner. Indeed, in France, national diplomas are accredited at the level of a disciplinary field by the Ministry, based on Hcéres' programme evaluation reports. This gives HEIs the autonomy to open and close new programmes within an accredited disciplinary field. Franchised programmes offered in joint universities are therefore not directly evaluated but they may be mentioned in the evaluation reports, produced by Hcéres, which cover the different disciplinary fields of a given education cycle (bachelor, master, doctorate). Joint universities can also be mentioned in the institutional evaluation of their French partner universities when looking at their international cooperation activities.

Although France does not have a specific policy on the QA of joint universities, a very brief thematic analysis of the evaluation reports of the three joint universities evaluated by Hcéres and of the programme and institutional evaluation reports of their French partner university highlights the strengths and weaknesses of such joint universities. The evaluations of the three universities considered, located in Armenia, Egypt and Vietnam, show that their intergovernmental character was seen as an asset in the sense that it enabled them to deliver attractive double diplomas and to benefit from a multilingual environment although the three reports highlighted the lack of support from the French government whose financial help was limited and decreasing. Consequently, the three joint universities were all facing premises issues during the evaluation and were seeking an alternative campus that would better suit their needs and offer better working and studying conditions.

3) The external evaluation of the French University in Armenia

UFAR, an intergovernmental university with specific features

UFAR exemplifies a model of transnational education, functioning as an intergovernmental institution founded through a bilateral partnership between the Armenian and French governments in 2001. This collaboration is further strengthened through joint initiatives between Armenia and two French HEIs, creating a distinctive educational framework that integrates academic standards, curricula, and cultural elements from both countries.

Given Armenia's difficult transitional period, the turmoil in the education system, and the high level of unemployment, the UFAR's statutory mission was to create favourable conditions for the University's development as a HEI inspired by the French model of "Grandes Ecoles" in accordance with international and European standards. Given the massive emigration of Armenians and the transition to a market economy, the labour market was in need of professionals who would stay in Armenia and develop the economy. This strategic focus translates into curricula that are closely aligned with industry requirements, partnerships with employers, and programmes that prioritise experiential learning, internships, and hands-on training. Rather than devoting resources to expanding its research capabilities, UFAR has concentrated on developing competencies that facilitate immediate job insertion and contribute to the economic growth of Armenia.

An attempt at a fit-for-purpose external evaluation of UFAR

The diminishing of educational boundaries has led to increased mobility of students, academic staff, programmes, institutions, and professionals, posing significant challenges for many countries in ensuring that academic programmes meet both local and international standards simultaneously (World Bank, 2007; Hou, 2012). Armenia faces similar challenges and the internationalisation of HEIs has been identified as a strategic objective in the country's Education Development Plan until 2030. In this context, joint evaluations are gaining prominence as a crucial mechanism for maintaining the quality and comparability of academic offerings. Thus, given the specific characteristics of UFAR, a joint external evaluation by Hcéres and ANQA seemed the most appropriate approach. In this way, UFAR would get a mandatory national accreditation and a French quality label.

The process started in February 2023 when Hcéres came to UFAR to meet its management team, visit the premises and discuss the concrete organisation of the joint evaluation with their Armenian counterparts at ANQA. The Hcéres representatives also met with the French Embassy in Yerevan to better understand the Armenian context.

A tripartite agreement between ANQA, Hcéres and UFAR was signed in June 2023 to define the timetable and organisation of this *ad hoc* evaluation, which was coordinated by the two agencies and relied on a binational expert panel comprising three Armenian experts (one student, one academic and one professional expert) and three French experts specialised in the academic fields taught at UFAR and in the governance of HEIs. Two of the experts also had experience working in other joint universities. The Hcéres standards for foreign HEIs were used as the basis for the evaluation and were supplemented by some criteria from ANQA. Indeed, although the standards used by ANQA and Hcéres are similar in content and both comply with the ESG, Hcéres' were broader and covered most of ANQA's criteria, except those specifically related to the Armenian context and the related data required by the national regulations, such as the compliance with the Armenian National Qualifications Framework. A combination of French standards and Armenian criteria therefore seemed fit for purpose. The binational panel was trained jointly by both agencies, it analysed UFAR's self-evaluation report and gathered for a single on-site visit to UFAR in October 2023. It consisted mainly of 25 interviews with internal and external stakeholders, conducted in Armenian with simultaneous translation into English, in accordance with the Language Law of the Republic of Armenia. The procedure was concluded with the publication of a single evaluation report (Hcéres, 2024) and two decisions were taken, one from Hcéres granting UFAR an international label for three years with follow-up and one from ANQA leading to a four-year national accreditation.

Benefits of the joint evaluation

This joint evaluation tried to respond to ENQA's recommendations by using the ESG as a basis for trust and cooperation, as they underpin the standards of both Hcéres and UFAR. The joint evaluation adopted as much as possible a fit-for-purpose approach, with a binational expert panel and binational coordination team from the two agencies. The French and Armenian representatives informed each other about the specificities of the higher education system of the two countries, which were at the heart of UFAR. Hcéres could learn from ANQA's direct integration of interviews on three specific programmes, chosen as a sample to evaluate the quality of study programmes at UFAR, within the institutional evaluation. This experience confirms that for agencies, a joint evaluation procedure gives the opportunity to concretely learn from each other's external QA practices in a kinaesthetic approach of

“learning by doing” which has proven to be efficient in the context of international cooperation (Guillet et al., 2023).

From UFAR’s perspective, the process enabled the university to simultaneously secure national accreditation and an international quality label, enhancing its credibility and appeal to prospective students, partners, and stakeholders. This dual recognition serves as a mark of quality that reassures both local and international communities about the university’s academic standards. In particular, the Hcéres’ label contributed to reinforcing the dialogue between UFAR and the French government, including the financial aspects. Additionally, the joint evaluation fostered a deeper understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities faced by intergovernmental universities. The binational panel of experts, composed of representatives familiar with both the Armenian and French higher education contexts, provided UFAR with comprehensive feedback tailored to its unique operational environment. This approach ensured that the recommendations were relevant and actionable for UFAR.

Although UFAR had internal QA mechanisms in place, they lacked a fully structured and systematic approach. The joint accreditation process acted as a crucial roadmap, helping UFAR to better organise and formalise these processes. It identified key areas where UFAR could strengthen its internal QA systems to align more effectively with both national and international standards. Following the evaluation, UFAR has developed an internal action plan in response to the recommendations made by both ANQA and Hcéres. This plan, which is a requirement of ANQA’s accreditation, includes clear timelines, designated responsibilities, and measurable objectives. A key component of this effort has been the creation of a comprehensive guide, “UFAR Learning Quality Assurance Process”, which provides a structured framework for UFAR’s QA cycle. It outlines each stage of the QA process ensuring that UFAR consistently upholds and enhances the quality of its academic offerings in line with both ANQA’s standards and Hcéres’ expectations.

Building on these achievements, the joint accreditation also sets the stage for UFAR’s 2025-2030 strategy, which includes a detailed multi-year planning framework. This framework incorporates specific strategic monitoring and indicators that translate broad objectives into actionable goals, each supported by provisional budgets. While emphasising the promotion of research, it remains attuned to UFAR’s unique capacities and the Armenian context.

Challenges faced in the joint evaluation

However, while both agencies followed the ESG, the divergence in the structure of the agencies’ evaluation frameworks also meant that their scope differed. Hcéres leaned more towards strategic management, long-term planning and research, while ANQA emphasised the alignment of academic programmes with national priorities and graduate employability. As a result, the evaluation of UFAR required a harmonised approach that integrated the differing priorities of the two agencies into a cohesive report. Despite the collaborative efforts of Hcéres and ANQA throughout the joint accreditation process, the UFAR staff who participated in the interviews occasionally perceived a gap in the experts’ understanding of its specific context, as an intergovernmental university. This discrepancy sometimes led to misplaced emphasis on certain aspects during the evaluation. For instance, UFAR was initially established with a mission to bridge the gap between the demands of the labour market and the offerings of HEIs. Unlike many traditional universities, UFAR has never aimed to be a research-focused institution. Instead, it has excelled in fulfilling its original mission, as evidenced by high job placement rates among graduates.

Another notable challenge in the joint accreditation process was the formulation of accreditation standards and criteria. UFAR, accustomed to local criteria, often found it difficult to fully comprehend the scope and objectives of the standards being used by Hcéres. While the French and Armenian colleagues were highly supportive and provided extensive clarification, these difficulties underline an inherent issue in joint accreditation processes, particularly when two different accreditation systems are converging. In this regard, the use of a “one-size-fits-all” approach in the evaluation of institutions can be problematic if local contexts and institutional missions are not sufficiently considered. Such challenges emphasise the need for adaptability in accreditation processes to accommodate diverse educational environments and missions, ensuring that evaluation standards are both relevant and fair across different cultural and operational settings. Ultimately, this experience shows that it can be difficult for a joint university responding to the needs of its territory to also meet the standards of the foreign

founding country. . In the case of UFAR, although stripped of direct French references, Hcéres' standards still reflected the French vision of a university, hence awarding a French label, which did not fully echo UFAR's mission.

Conclusions and lessons learned from multi-level cooperation

Joint accreditations enable joint universities to meet the standards of both participating higher education systems, thereby strengthening their international settings while simultaneously fulfilling national educational regulations. The joint evaluation provided an opportunity for UFAR to build its institutional capacity through interactions with both French and Armenian QA experts. UFAR's commitment to sustainability was reinforced, as the formalisation of QA processes created a foundation for continuous improvement and operational resilience, aligning with evolving trends in higher education governance (Lozano, 2013; Leal Filho et al., 2019).

Such benefits come with some challenges. The particular environment of joint universities requires a fit-for-purpose approach which could not be fully achieved in the example of a joint evaluation presented in this article. For universities, compliance with both national and international quality frameworks often poses the challenge of maintaining institutional autonomy as accreditation brings external expectations that require academic adjustments (Cain, 2014; Estermann et al., 2011). Although the trust provided by the use of the ESG and the registration of agencies in EQAR is a good start to creating a common quality assurance language (EQAR, 2023), finding common ground for a joint evaluation is not that simple.

Beyond the question of the adaptability of the tools used to the local context, the evaluation of UFAR as an intergovernmental university raises the question of evaluation as a political lever to highlight the needs of these particular institutions. The in-depth analysis of their strategy and resources raises the question of the adequacy of resources and the attention paid by the founding government to these "strategic cooperation tools" (Euzet, 2024). Thus, given that the most pressing issues of joint universities seem to lie in their organisation and governance model, the teaching and learning focus of the ESG may seem limiting and lacking a broader institutional perspective. Such questions could also be raised for other types of TNE such as the European Universities Alliances. At a time when new models based on cooperation are under development, the example of the evaluation of joint universities highlights the importance of trust and cooperation in the field of quality assurance.

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