

THE EUROPEAN APPROACH IN FRANCE, FROM THE EVALUATION OF A JOINT PROGRAMME TO ITS ACCREDITATION

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The High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres) carries out two types of programme evaluations: cyclical and compulsory national evaluations of an institution's educational offerings, and evaluations of joint programmes using the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*. The latter type of evaluation is voluntary and based on a European methodology and set of standards and is conducted at the request of the institution.

The purpose of this note is to distinguish the European Approach procedure carried out by Hcéres, or any other authorised European agency, from the programme accreditation procedure, carried out exclusively by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Space (MESRE).

Details of the *European Approach* assessment procedure can be found in the dedicated [Guide](#).

1) MISSIONS OF HCÉRES AND MESRE

French legislation requires the periodic evaluation of national degrees and institutional degrees conferring bachelor's or master's degrees. These evaluations are compulsory and are a prerequisite for national accreditation decisions by the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESRE), relating to the disciplinary field (*mention*) or level (*grade*) of a degree. Programmes are evaluated by the Hcéres and the accreditation decision is subsequently made by the MESRE. Further information on the accreditation of programmes in France can be found in Appendix 1.

At Hcéres, two departments carry out programme evaluations, though at different levels:

- the Programme Evaluation Department, which evaluates the educational offerings of French higher education institutions;
- the Europe and International Affairs Department, which evaluates, among others, joint programmes on request, using the European Approach procedure.

This note focuses on evaluations of joint programmes, which use the European Approach methodology and standards. These evaluations are conducted by the Hcéres Europe and International Affairs Department at the request of an institution.

2) EVALUATION OF JOINT PROGRAMMES - THE EUROPEAN APPROACH AT A GLANCE

2.1 What is a joint programme?

Only joint programmes are eligible for the *European Approach* evaluation procedure. A joint programme is defined as "an integrated programme, coordinated and offered jointly by different institutions, and leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree¹".

Therefore, a programme is classified as joint not solely based on the type of degree it confers, but rather on its integrated structure with partner universities. In France, a joint programme may award either a national degree or a degree equivalent (*grade*) to a bachelor's degree² or master's degree³. If it awards a national degree, the joint programme can be awarded within an already accredited disciplinary field.

¹ <https://www.eqa.eu/kb/joint-programmes/definitions/#:~:text=Joint%20programs%20are%20understood%20as,degrees%20or%20a%20joint%20degree>

² <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGITEXT000028545004>

³ <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000028583174>

When implementing an international partnership degree, the institution must notify the MESRE and the Hcéres ([article D. 613-21 of the Education Code](#)).

2.2 What are the objectives of the European Approach?

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, including its standards and methodology, was adopted during the 2015 ministerial conference of the Bologna Follow-up Group. This approach is aligned with the ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area).

The European Approach aims to assess the level of integration of joint programmes, in other words, its jointness, which cannot be adequately evaluated using the quality assurance agencies' national standards. The European Approach comprises nine evaluation standards⁴ :

- programme eligibility;
- learning outcomes;
- study programme;
- admission and recognition;
- teaching, learning and assessment;
- student support;
- resources;
- transparency and documentation;
- quality assurance.

The European Approach procedure has been designed so that only one agency carries out the evaluation for a joint programme involving several countries. This agency must be registered in [EQAR](#) (*European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education*), which is the case for Hcéres. In instances where a joint programme is evaluated by another agency, the French institution overseeing the programme is required to inform Hcéres.

The evaluation report produced by Hcéres (or any other agency registered with EQAR) is supposed to be recognised in the countries of the European Higher Education Area. The European Approach methodology states that the accreditation decision remains valid for six years.

2.3 What are the eligibility criteria for requesting an evaluation with the European Approach?

The European Approach evaluation procedure can be applied to all joint programmes as defined in section 2.1. This evaluation can cover programmes that have not yet enrolled students (*ex ante* evaluation) or those that already have (*ex post* evaluation).

However, joint programmes are not obliged to undergo an evaluation through the *European Approach*. This process is voluntary and, in France, it is not directly related to the accreditation of the programme decided by the MESRE, as further elaborated in the following section.

3) LINKS BETWEEN AN HCÉRES EVALUATION WITH THE EUROPEAN APPROACH AND THE PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION DELIVERED BY THE MESRE

The evaluation procedures for a joint programme and its accreditation are not correlated. The European Approach has no impact on accreditation in France, except in cases where a joint programme seeks to renew a degree equivalent to a bachelor's or master's degree based on an evaluation using the European Approach. The details of these two cases are provided below.

3.1 Cases where the evaluation of the joint programme with the European Approach is not related to MESRE accreditation

In the vast majority of situations, the European Approach procedure is separate from the accreditation procedures of the Ministry. This applies to:

- any joint programme, whether newly established or not, can be considered a study programme within a disciplinary field (*mention*) within an institution accredited to award national bachelor's or master's degrees. In France, accredited institutions

⁴ https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmesv1_0-2015.pdf

have the autonomy to create (joint) study programmes within the framework of disciplinary fields outlined in national nomenclatures (available in appendix 2).

- any joint programme newly created that offers institutional degree⁵ equivalent to a bachelor's degree or master's degree⁶. Evaluation of such institutional degrees is not compulsory at the time of their creation. This means that the evaluation process with the European Approach is not directly tied to the award of such degrees upon their creation.

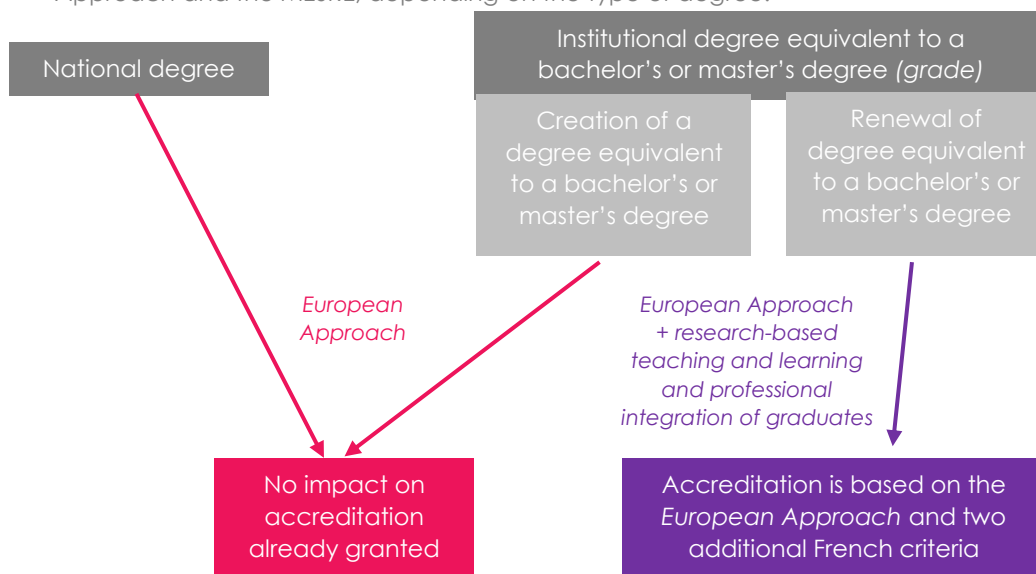
Programmes evaluated with the European Approach are not exempt from undergoing the periodic programme evaluation procedure conducted by Hcéres. This is because the two procedures serve different evaluation purposes and focus on distinct aspects of the programme.

3.2 Cases where the evaluation of the joint programme with the European Approach can be used for MESRE accreditation purposes

If an institution wishes to use the European Approach when renewing an institutional degree equivalent to a bachelor's or master's degree (six years after its creation), the European Approach standards do not enable the MESRE to renew the degree based on French criteria. Specifically, two French accreditation criteria are not addressed by the European Approach standards: research-based teaching and learning, and readiness for professional integration.

In this specific and rare case, the European Approach evaluation will have to take these two additional criteria into account if the programme is to have its bachelor's and master's degree equivalents renewed.

Diagram 1. Relationship between the Hcéres national evaluation, the European Approach and the MESRE, depending on the type of degree.



4) CONCLUSION: WHAT IS THE ADDED VALUE OF THE EUROPEAN APPROACH FOR JOINT PROGRAMMES PARTNERS?

As explained in section 3, the evaluation of a joint programme using the European Approach is not compulsory in France and is not usually associated with the award of a degree by an accredited institution.

In addition to serving as a tool for continuous improvement for the institutions participating in the joint programme, the European Approach evaluation has the advantage of being recognised across member countries of the European Higher Education Area. Moreover,

⁵ <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGITEXT000028545004>

⁶ <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000028583174>

this evaluation is conducted by a single agency, even in cases where the programme involves multiple countries.

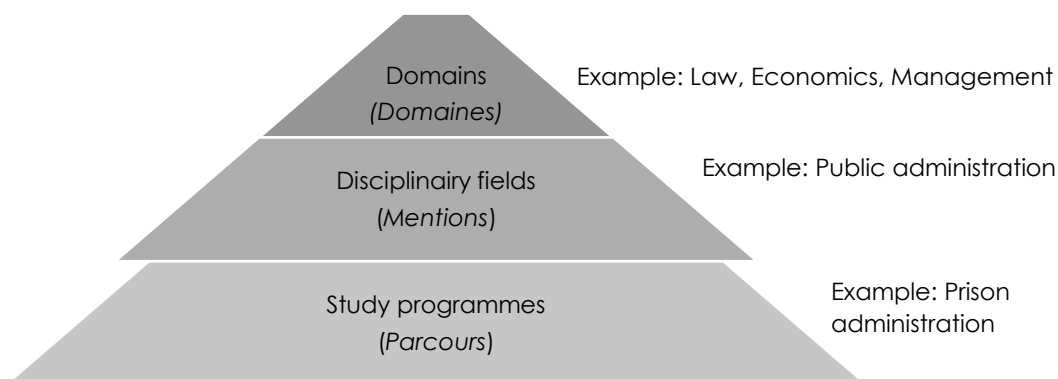
Furthermore, the European Commission's Erasmus Mundus programme actively promotes the establishment of consortia involved in joint programme evaluations using the European Approach. Both types of Erasmus Mundus support (*joint masters and design measure*) mention the *European Approach* in their award criteria⁷ :

- Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (EMJM): "At application stage full partner HEIs must demonstrate to have fulfilled the external Quality Assurance (QA) requirements of their jurisdiction for the joint programme. This can result either (i) from having successfully implemented the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (if national legislation allows), (ii) or be based on a specific accreditation/evaluation of the joint programme, (iii) or of each national component on the basis of which the EMJM is composed";
- Erasmus Mundus Design Measures (EMDM): "It is encouraged to at least launch any accreditation/evaluation process before the end of the project, and explore the opportunities offered by the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (if national legislation allows)".

APPENDIX 1: ACCREDITATION OF BACHELOR'S AND MASTER'S DEGREE COURSES IN FRANCE

In France, each level of higher education is organised into educational offerings structured into domains, disciplinary fields and study programmes, as set out in the decree of 22 January 2014, establishing the national framework for programmes. The framework identifies four domains: Arts, Humanities, Languages; Law, Economics, Management; Humanities and Social Sciences; Sciences, Technologies, and Health. Within these domains, French national nomenclatures define specific disciplinary fields (*mentions*). Institutions have the autonomy to organise (joint) study programmes within these fields and name them as they see fit.

Diagram 1. Architecture of the national framework for programmes leading to the award of degrees



The award of a degree by an accredited institution is based on six key conditions defined by the decree of 27 January 2020. These stipulate that a study programme must :

- guarantee academic quality and a strong research base ;
- prepare for professional integration ;
- promote the success of all students;
- define a social policy to ensure access to education for all ;
- include its educational offerings in the local engagement policy ;
- promote international mobility ;
- implement quality assurance procedures to ensure continuous improvement in education.

⁷ https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/erasmus-mundus#footnote2_dj8y5hr

Accreditation is issued for a period of six years in France.

National degrees

As the accreditation of institutions to award degrees is based on disciplinary fields (mentions) set at a national level, within which institutions can create their own study programmes (parcours), evaluating a single programme in a disciplinary field using the European Approach has no impact on the MESRE's accreditation at the level of the disciplinary field. The accreditation of an institution to award degrees in a given disciplinary field is based on the compulsory evaluation of all programmes in that field by the Hcéres Programme Evaluation Department every six years.

Institutional degrees equivalent to a bachelor's degree or a master's degree

According to the Order of 27 January 2020, the evaluation of institutional degrees equivalent to bachelor's or master's degrees is not mandatory at the time of their creation. However, it becomes mandatory at the time of renewal. Degrees equivalent to a bachelor's or master's degree must undergo periodic national evaluations encompassing the six aforementioned criteria.

APPENDIX 2: RESOURCE DOCUMENTS

- Methodology and evaluation standards for the *European Approach*:
https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmesv1_0-2015.pdf
- Arrêté du 22 janvier 2014 fixant le cadre national des formations conduisant à la délivrance des diplômes nationaux de licence, de licence professionnelle et de master: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000028543525/>
- Order of 27 January 2020 on the specifications for bachelor's and master's degrees: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000041623431/>
- Order of 22 January 2014 establishing the nomenclature of terms for the national bachelor's degree:
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGITEXT000028545004>
- Order of 4 February 2014 establishing the nomenclature of terms for the national master's degree: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000028583174>
- Erasmus Mundus Action Guide (European Commission website): https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/erasmus-mundus#footnote2_dj8y5hr
- Order of 22 July 2014 laying down the procedures for the accreditation of higher education institutions:
https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000028543620?init=true&page=1&query=arr%C3%AAt%C3%A9+accred%C3%A9ditation&searchField=ALL&tab_selection=all