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

The Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur (Hcéres) carries out two types of programme evaluations: periodic and compulsory national evaluations of programmes, occuring every five years, 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 reference framework, at the request of the institution, and is conducted at the request of the institution.

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

Details of the European Approach assessment procedure can be found in the Guide.

1) MISSIONS OF HÇÈRES AND MESR

French legislation mandates for the periodic evaluation of national degrees and institutional degrees conferring bachelor’s or master's degrees. These evaluations are compulsory and serve as a prerequisite for national accreditation decisions by the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESR), which pertains to the disciplinary field (mention) or level (grade) of a diploma. Programmes are evaluated by the Hcéres and the accreditation decision is subsequently made by the MESR. 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 Department for the Evaluation of Education and Training (DEF), which evaluates nearly 6,500 programmes and degrees every five years1. These national evaluations are compulsory and are a prerequisite for the MESR’s accreditation decisions;
- the Europe and International Department (DEI), which evaluates, among others, co/joint programmes on request, using the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

This note focuses on evaluations of joint programmes, which use the European Approach methodology and framework. These evaluations are conducted by the Hcéres Europe and International Department upon request from 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 degree2.”

Therefore, the classification of a programme as joint is not solely contingent on the type of degree it confers, but rather on its integrated structure with partner universities. In France, a joint programme may award a national degree or a degree conferring the level (grade) of licence3 or master4. If it awards a national degree, the joint programme serves as a...
learning path within an already accredited disciplinary field. For instance, a course in sports management may be part of the technical sciences for physical sports activities (STAPS) accredited disciplinary field.

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

2.2 What are the objectives of the European Approach?

The framework and methodology of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes were adopted in 2015 during the ministerial conference of the Bologna Follow-up Group. This approach aligns with the ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area).

The European Approach aims to assess the jointness / level of integration of the programme, which cannot be adequately assessed using national standards of the quality assurance agencies. The assessment criteria under the European Approach consist of nine references:

- programme eligibility;
- learning outcomes;
- the curriculum;
- admission and recognition;
- teaching, learning and assessment for students;
- student support services;
- resources;
- transparency and documentation;
- quality assurance.

The European Approach procedure has been designed in such a way that, for a joint programme involving several countries, only one agency carries out the evaluation. 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 automatically recognised in the member countries of the consortium running the joint programme. According to the European Approach methodology, the accreditation decision remains valid for six years.

2.3 What are the eligibility criteria for requesting an assessment by the European Approach?

The European Approach evaluation procedure can be applied to all joint programmes as defined in section 2.1. This evaluation may involve new programmes which have not yet enrolled students (ex ante evaluation) or existing programmes (ex post evaluation).

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

3) LINKS BETWEEN AN HCÉRES ASSESSMENT USING THE EUROPEAN APPROACH AND THE ACCREDITATION OF MESR COURSES

The assessment procedures for a joint programme and its accreditation are decorelated. The European Approach has no impact on accreditation, except in cases where a joint programme seeks to renew its diploma level (grade) based on an evaluation using the European Approach. Below are the details of these two scenarios.

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

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

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any joint programme, whether newly established or not, can be considered a learning path of a disciplinary field (mention) within an institution accredited to award national bachelor’s or master’s degrees. Accredited institutions in France have the autonomy to create programmes or learning paths within the framework of disciplinary fields outlined in national nomenclatures (available in appendix 2).

- Therefore, these programs or learning paths are recognized in France by virtue of the institution’s accreditation, which is based on disciplinary fields. Any joint programme newly created that offers institutional diploma** conferring bachelor’s or master’s degrees**. Evaluation of such institutional diplomas by the European Approach is not compulsory at the time of their creation. This mean that the evaluation process is not directly tied to the award of degrees upon their creation.

Programmes evaluated using the European Approach are not exempt from undergoing the periodic training evaluation procedure conducted by the 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 MESR accreditation purposes

If an institution wishes to use the European Approach when renewing an institutional degree conferring a bachelor’s or master’s degree (five years after its establishment), the European Approach reference framework does not enable the MESR to renew the degree level based on French criteria. Specifically, two French accreditation criteria are not addressed by the European Approach references: the correlation between education and research, and readiness for professional integration.

In this specific case, the evaluation with the European Approach will have to take these two additional criteria into account if the programme wants to benefit from a degree level (grade) renewal.

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

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

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

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**https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGITEXT000028545004**

**https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000028583174**
In addition to serving as a tool for continuous improvement for the institutions participating in the joint programme, the European Approach evaluation offers the advantage of being recognised across member countries of the European Higher Education Area. Moreover, 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 programmes evaluation using the European Approach. Both types of Erasmus Mundus support (joint masters and design measure) mention the European Approach in their award criteria:

- Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (EMJM): “Extent to which the jointly designed and fully integrated curriculum adheres to the Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the European Higher Education Area”;
- Erasmus Mundus Design Measures (EMDM): “Planned steps to launch an accreditation/evaluation process for the proposed Master course, if possible taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes”.

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

In France, each level of higher education is organised into a range of courses structured into fields, majors, and courses, as outlined in the decree of 22 January 2014, setting the national framework for courses. The framework identifies four fields: Arts, Humanities, Languages, Law, economics, Management, Humanities and Social Sciences, Sciences, Technologies, and Health. Within these learning areas (parcours), French national nomenclatures define specific disciplinary fields (mentions). Institutions have the autonomy to organise various courses/learning paths within these fields, naming them as they see fit. Joint programmes thus operate as pathways within this framework.

The award of a diploma by an accredited institution is based on six key conditions defined by the decree of 27 January 2020. These stipulate that a course 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 training for all;
- include its training offer in the site policy;
- promote international mobility;
- implement a quality approach to ensure continuous improvement in education.

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* [https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/erasmus-mundus#footnote2_dj8y5hr](https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/erasmus-mundus#footnote2_dj8y5hr)
Accreditation is issued for a period of five years in France.

**National diplomas**

Given that the accreditation of an institution to award a degree is based on a disciplinary field (mention) set at national level, within which institutions are free to create their own learning paths/programmes (parcours), the evaluation of a single learning path/programme in the disciplinary field (mention) using the European Approach has no impact on the MESR’s accreditation at disciplinary field (mention) level. The accreditation of an institution to award a degree in a disciplinary field is based on the compulsory evaluation of all the learning paths/programmes (parcours) in a disciplinary field (mention) by the Hcéres Department for the Evaluation of Training (DEF) every five years.

In other words, it is the number of programmes (parcours) with a positive accreditation opinion after evaluation by the Hcéres Department for the Evaluation of Training (DEF) that determines the French Higher education and Research ministry’s accreditation decision at disciplinary field (mention) level. Since a joint programme is just one of the learning paths, its evaluation using the European Approach does no influence the accreditation decision.

**Institutional diplomas conferring bachelor's or master's degrees**

The evaluation of institutional degrees conferring bachelor's or master's degrees is not mandatory at the time of their creation, according to the Order of 27 January 2020. However, it becomes obligatory at the time of their renewal. Degree-granting diplomas must undergo periodic national evaluation, which encompasses the six criteria mentioned earlier.

### APPENDIX 2: RESOURCE DOCUMENTS

- 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/](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/](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](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](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000028583174)
- 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%A9t%C3%A9%20accr%C3%A9ditation&searchField=ALL&tab_selection=all](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000028543620?init=true&page=1&query=arr%C3%A9t%C3%A9%20accr%C3%A9ditation&searchField=ALL&tab_selection=all)