Quality Assurance of Joint Degree Programs: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Joint degree programs have been developed in reaction to globalization, providing students with the chance to pursue higher education internationally. This study examines the quality assurance procedures that govern such programs. Commencing with the fundamental ideas and a chronological survey, it charts the development of joint degree programs, emphasizing their importance in promoting intercultural cooperation and scholarly interchange. Subsequently, an evaluation of internal quality assurance is conducted at both the home and host institutions, with a focus on the significance of upholding uniform standards in various educational settings. This entails ensuring the congruence of courses, assessment modalities, and student assistance provisions. Furthermore, external quality assurance measures, including as assessment standards and accreditation procedures, are crucial in maintaining the legitimacy and comparability of joint degree programs at a worldwide level. Accreditation agencies and regulatory bodies play a crucial role in verifying the quality of programs and promoting their recognition. Nevertheless, the study also examines the difficulties that naturally arise in ensuring quality, such as variations in academic cultures, legal frameworks, and logistical obstacles. These challenges require creative methods to align standards and improve clarity in evaluation procedures. In conclusion, this literature review highlights the complex and diverse aspects of quality assurance in international joint degree programs. It emphasizes the importance of stakeholder collaboration in order to guarantee academic excellence and the achievement of students studying abroad.

Keywords: quality assurance, joint program, transnational education, accreditation, student mobility

1. Introduction

Thanks to the growth of transnational education, joint degree programs have become popular in many higher education systems all over the world. Joint degree programs are now seen as a strategic investment in training future leaders who can effectively and innovatively handle difficult global problems. In Europe, about eighty-four percent of the universities have provided these programs, with 33 percent actually awarding them. Nearly every European nation has passed the necessary laws to allow for these kinds of higher education degree (European Consortium for Accreditation, 2013, cited in Hou et al., 2016). In Asia, internationalization of higher education is promoted by governments through the implementation of joint degree programs. Thus, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of these programs in recent years. Many Asian institutions are open to forming partnerships with esteemed universities overseas, especially those in Australia, the UK and the USA (Huang, 2007).

Many countries have made ensuring the quality of joint degree programs a top priority due to their rapid expansion. Quality assurance of joint degree programs has received the concern of all the keystakeholders including government, society, employers, students and parents. The main reason is that ensuring the quality of these such programs required the involvement of a couple of institutions and multiple naitonal assessment procedures (Hou et al., 2016).Quality assurance in joint degree programs is a comprehensive strategy designed to guarantee the high standard, applicability, and honesty of the educational experience. This entails the implementation of strict criteria, procedures, and methods to assess and improve the different elements of the program.

This paper reviews the associated literature regarding the quality assurance of joint degree programs. First of all, it investigates the concepts and historical development of joint degree programs. Second, the study synthesizes the internal quality assurance of joint degree programs. Next, the paper discusses the external of joint degree programs. Finally, it outlines the challenges in assuring the quality of joint degree programs.

2. Concepts and historical development of joint degree programs

2.1. Concepts of joint degree programs

Within the perpetually changing realm of higher education, joint degree programs emerge as a cooperative paradigm of transnational education. First of all, Aerden and Reczulska (2012) define a joint degree as one document that is accepted across the country as the award for the joint program and has been signed by the authorities from each of the institutions involved in the joint degree. According to Lund University and University of Bergen (n.d.), a joint degree is an academic arrangement where two or more institutions

collaborate on a study program that results in the awarding of a single degree. This implies that all collaborating institutions bear the responsibility for the entire program, rather than for their individual components.

Focusing on international joint degree programs, Obst et al. (2011) state that they are academic programs that are jointly offered by two or more higher education institutions situated in different countries. Typically, these programs include a curriculum that is established and integrated together, and there is an agreement on how credits will be recognized. Upon finishing the study program, students will receive a single joint qualification that is endorsed by all the institutions participating in the program, both local and abroad. In addition, Knight (2011) confirm joint degree programs are autonomous academic routes in which the student maintains enrollment at two distinct institutions located in separate countries.

Generally, the term "joint degree program" refers to a collaboration between two academic institutions to offer a curriculum that enables students to earn two degrees from each institution or a joint qualification from all participating providers. In practice, the implementation of collaborative courses or programs may be conducted independently or in conjunction, yielding diverse consequences (Chan, 2012).

2.2. Development of joint degree programs
Joint degree programs are being developed by an increasing number of educational institutions. This tendency can be attributed to a number of factors, such as the necessity of adapting to shifting professional requirements, the push to reorganize degree programs in order to make them more multidisciplinary, the demand from students, and the calls to improve the specifics of certain degree programs (Hou 2019). However, creating a joint degree is more arduous than creating a double degree. Institutions are unable to effectively support programs both domestically and internationally at the same time, and it will take time for partner institutions to establish partnership (Knight, 2011).

The decade of the 1990s marked the beginning of the growth of joint and double degrees in Europe. In comparison to the institutions in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, where the majority of their programs have been produced in the last decade, universities in France, Germany, and Italy have claimed that their programs were initiated between the years 1991 and 2000 (Moodie, 2011). In an effort to raise the profile and influence of higher education in Europe on a global scale, the European Union (EU) established the Erasmus Mundus program in 1987 to provide financial assistance to high-quality joint master's degree programs. These programs include scholarship opportunities for students from countries outside of the EU to pursue their education in Europe. The program was highly applicable to all the objectives of the Bologna process and greatly enhanced the advancement of collaborative quality assurance, recognition, and the transparency and alignment of higher education systems across Europe. Additionally, it promoted student and staff mobility, improved graduate employability, enhanced the European aspect of studies, and increased the appeal of European education (Rauhvargers et al., 2002).

As a result of the worldwide trend toward student mobility, a number of Asian countries have established explicit requirements for international joint degree programs. Asian universities have a propensity to engage in collaborative endeavors with esteemed institutions abroad, especially those from Europe, Australia and the United States.Additionally, the number of Asian higher education institutions forming partnerships with its neighbours' universities has been on the rise recently. Joint degree programs are predominantly provided in professional domains, including but not limited to business and management, engineering, computing, and information science (Chan, 2012; Hou, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021).

3. Internal quality assurance of joint degree programs
3.1. Internal quality assurance
Quality in general and quality assurance in particular are a multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions. Woodhouse (1999) defines quality assurance as the comprehensive set of systems, rules, procedures, processes, activities, and attitudes employed by an authorized business or educational institution to assess, cultivate, and execute strategies for achieving, sustaining, overseeing, and reinforcing quality. Moreover,Vlăsceanu et al. (2007) believe that quality assurance is"an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmes" (p. 74).

Two concepts are frequently mentioned when discussing quality assurance: internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA). Internal quality assurance pertains to the protocols and systems implemented by individual educational establishments and training programs to guarantee the successful attainment of their intended aims and objectives. Standards pertain to the realm of higher education as a whole or to specific professional disciplines (UNESCO-IIEP, 2006). Consequently, Tamrat (2019) believes that setting up an internal quality assurance system in a college or university is often seen as the most important thing that can be done to keep quality high in the long term.

According to Wilger (1997), internal quality assurance is an intricate procedure by which a university guarantees that the quality of educational processes is upheld in accordance with established criteria. By engaging in quality assurance initiatives, universities may ensure the satisfaction of themselves, students, and external stakeholders. Finally, Nguyen (2017) confirms that the three primary attributes of internal quality assurance are as follows: firstly, internal quality assurance centers its attention on processes, thereby confirming to both internal and external stakeholders that the institution has established procedures to consistently generate high-quality output. Second, internal quality assurance is primarily concerned with ensuring accountability and enhancing the quality of processes and outcomes. Third, internal quality assurance is an ongoing and consistent procedure that relies on assessment standards and input.

3.2. Quality assurance of joint degree programs at home institutions

Joint degree programs, in contrast to alternative modes of transnational provider and program mobility, necessitate intense academic collaboration among participating entities in order to formulate course materials, oversee delivery quality, and bestow credentials (Lane & Kinser, 2014). Ensuring the quality of joint degree programs at home universities is essential to guarantee that these programs adhere to established criteria of excellence and offer students relevant and officially recognized certificates. Many home institutions implement many procedures to ensure the quality of their overseas joint programs. These efforts are implemented to preserve the program's academic rigor, provide a high-caliber learning experience for students, and sustain the reputation of the institutions involved (Hou, 2020, Nguyen et al, 2021).

Focusing on the status, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (2014) requires that the institutions that provide a joint degree program must be acknowledged as higher education institutions by the appropriate authorities in their respective countries. Their individual national legal systems should provide them with the ability to take part in the collaborative program and, if relevant, to grant a shared degree. The institutions granting the degree(s) must verify that the degree(s) are aligned with the higher education degree systems of the countries in which they are located. It is important to note that the term "home university" refers to the institution where students begin their university studies and where they apply for a dual certification (URV Governing Council, 2016).

Focusing on selecting partners, Lund University and University of Bergen (n.d.) stress that this needs to be done with meticulous discernment. Having a strong pre-existing rapport amongst academic groups is beneficial when they aim to start a collaborative program. Crucial considerations for selecting partners include being acquainted with their academic capabilities, having access to sufficient resources, ensuring their credibility through formal accreditation and reputation, and confirming their commitment to executing the program. It is crucial to take into account not only the academic factors but also the administrative capabilities of the possible partners. Increasing the number of partners can make it more challenging to coordinate collaboration.

3.3. Quality assurance of joint degree programs at host institutions

The term "host university" refers to the educational institution that serves as the location for the students to complete their academic mobility. Host universities have a vital responsibility in guaranteeing the quality of their international joint programs by ensuring that students enjoy a top-notch educational experience that conforms to the norms and expectations of the home institution. First of all, when establishing a joint degree program, host universities must create a new International Cooperative Department or Major inside an existing faculty or graduate school. This department will serve as an internal body to oversee the implementation of the International Cooperative Curricula. Host universities need to possess a specific quantity of instructional resources, including faculty organizations, physical spaces, and technological tools, and to design their own academic programs, including credit-bearing courses that meet the graduation requirements set by each university, in line with their own plans for supervision (Central Council for Education, 2014).

For student supervision, the host university has to set up a supervisory group that the students can talk to during the exchange. Students will be able to use all the services and teaching materials that home students can use. For credits to be accepted, they must have been acknowledged by the home university after being completed at the host institution. Finally, when the joint degree students' study visit at the host institution is over, the host institution needs to give the home institution a file with the students' grades (URV Governing Council, 2016).

Host universities must be lawfully formed and operate in host countries and are acknowledged for their educational excellence by accreditation agencies, organizations, or educational authorities. When a degree is obtained from a foreign higher education institution, the admission requirements for undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees of the foreign educational institution must align with the admission requirements in the host country where the foreign educational institution is located (The Government, 2018).

4. External quality assurance of joint degree programs

4.1. External quality assurance

As discussed previously, internal quality assurance and external quality assurance are two essential components of ensuring the quality of higher education institutions and programs. While they serve distinct purposes, they are interconnected and work together to uphold and enhance the quality standards of education. According to UNESCO-IIP (2006), external quality assurance involves the activities of an entity outside the institution, which may be an accrediting organization that evaluates school performance or training programs to determine whether the school or whether training programs meet pre-agreed standards. Tamrat (2021) argues that external quality assurance assesses the presence of a quality monitoring or assurance system within an organization, functioning as an indicator of the institution's merits and deficiencies. Therefore, external quality assurance's objective is to assess the processes and procedures utilized by institutions of higher education to ensure that their educational standards remain in line with predetermined goals.

According to QAHE (n.d.), external quality assurance has some key aspects. First of all, educational institutions undergo assessment by external quality assurance agencies in accordance with predetermined criteria and standards. Accreditation or certification is bestowed upon establishments that satisfy these criteria, signifying their dedication to providing high-quality education. Accreditation serves to bolster the standing of an institution, enable the movement of students, and instill confidence among stakeholders. Second, external quality assurance agencies undertake comprehensive reviews of institutions using peer review techniques. This process include the presence of external specialists who visit the school, examine documents, conduct interviews, and evaluate several factors such as curriculum, faculty credentials, infrastructure, and governance.

In addition,through the use of external quality assurance, educational institutions are guaranteed to be in compliance with the regulatory standards that are established by governing bodies. This involves adhering to ethical and legal standards, maintaining financial transparency, and complying with all applicable policies and regulations. Finally, external quality assurance agencies facilitate ongoing enhancements within academic establishments through the provision of constructive criticism, suggestions, and assistance. It is highly recommended that institutions take steps to rectify any identified areas for improvement during the evaluation process, as this will result in improved quality and efficacy (QAHE, n.d.).

4.2. External quality assurance standards

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) developed the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes to ease external quality assurance of these programmes. The objective of this document is to eliminate a significant barrier to the advancement of collaborative initiatives by establishing benchmarks for such initiatives that are founded on the instruments agreed upon by the EHEA, without imposing supplementary national standards. Additionally, it should enable the implementation of integrated quality assurance strategies for joint programs that accurately mirror and reflect their collaborative nature (EHEA, 2014).

The set of standards for quality assurance of joint programmes in the EHEA has nine standards. They include: (1) Eligibility, (2) Learning outcomes, (3) Study programme, (4) Admission and recognition, (5) Learning, teaching and assessment, (6) Student support, (7) resources, (8) Transparency and documentation, and (9) Quality assurance(EHEA, 2014). Below is the content of several standards.

Standard 1. Eligibility has three criteria, including: status, joint design and delivery, and cooperation agreement. The joint programme should be given collectively, with the participation of all collaborating institutions in the design and implementation of the program.

Standard 5 highlights learning and teaching, and assessment of students. The program ought to be structured in alignment with the desired educational objectives, and the instructional and learning methodologies implemented should be sufficient to accomplish those goals. Particular attention should be paid to the potential cultural diversity of the student body, which necessitates respect for the diversity of students and their requirements. It is imperative that the regulations governing examinations and the evaluation of attained learning outcomes align precisely with the intended learning outcomes. They ought to be uniformly implemented across all associated institutions.

Standard 6 focuses on student support. The student support services should play a role in facilitating the attainment of the desired educational objectives. It is important to consider the unique difficulties faced by students who are constantly on the go.

Standard 7 requires resources in staff and facilities. Specifically, it is necessary that the staff have sufficient and acceptable qualifications, as well as professional and international experience, in order to successfully carry out the study program. Taking into consideration the desired results of the learning experience, the facilities that are supplied ought to be sufficient and adequate.

Standard 8 mandates the comprehensive documentation and publication of pertinent information about the program, including admission criteria and procedures, course offerings, test and evaluation protocols, and other

essential details. This should be done with consideration for the special requirements of mobile students. Finally, dtandard 9 requires that the collaborating institutions must implement shared internal quality assurance procedures in alignment with part one of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

4.3. External quality assurance procedure
The cooperating institutions should jointly select a suitable external qualityassurance agency. It is important for the agency to maintain proper communication with the relevant national authorities of the countries where the cooperating universities are located. There are nine steps in this procedure. Below are some of the most important ones.

4.3.1. Self-Evaluation Report
The external quality assurance process ought to rely on a self-evaluation report (SER) that the cooperating institutions submit collectively. The SER ought to encompass thorough details that illustrate the program's adherence to the Standards for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the EHEA (section 4.2). Furthermore, the report ought to encompass essential details regarding the national frameworks of the cooperating institutions, which may be required by foreign agencies and experts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context. This information should particularly highlight the program's placement within the national higher education systems. The SER ought to place explicit emphasis on the unique characteristic of the joint program, which is its status as a collaborative effort between higher education institutions from multiple national higher education systems.

4.3.2. Review Panel
The agency should establish a panel consisting of a minimum of four members. The panel should possess a combination of knowledge and proficiency in the relevant subject(s) or discipline(s), specifically in the labour market/world of work within the relevant field(s), as well as expertise in quality assurance in higher education. The panel's worldwide skills and experience should enable them to consider the unique characteristics of the joint programme. The panel as a whole should have a comprehensive understanding of the higher education systems of the higher education institutions involved, as well as the language(s) of teaching utilized. The panel must consist of representatives from a minimum of two nations participating in the consortium responsible for delivering the program. The panel must consist of a minimum of one student. The agency must guarantee the neutrality of the experts and demonstrate justice towards the higher education institutions that are applying. In order to achieve this objective, the institutions should possess the authority to submit valid concerns against a panel member, but they should not have the authority to reject their appointment. The agency should provide a detailed briefing to the experts regarding the review activity, clearly outlining their specialized responsibilities and the precise details of the quality assurance system. The briefing should specifically emphasize the unique characteristics of a collaborative initiative.

4.3.3. Site Visit
The purpose of the site visit is to facilitate the discussion of the joint programme by the review panel, based on the self-evaluation report, and to evaluate whether the programme adheres to the Standards (section 4.2). The site visit should encompass dialogues with delegates from all collaborating establishments, with a special focus on the administration of the institutions and the program, the faculty, the students, and other pertinent stakeholders, including alumni and professionals in the field. While typically limited to one location, it is important to consider the availability of provisions at all sites during the site visit.

4.3.4. Review Report
It is the responsibility of the review panel to compile a report that includes pertinent evidence, analysis, and findings in relation to the Standards (section 4.2). In addition to that, the report ought to provide suggestions for further developing the program. It is the responsibility of the review panel to provide a recommendation for the decision in the event that the review arrives at a formal conclusion. When drawing findings and making recommendations, it is important to pay special attention to the unique aspects of the joint program. The institutions ought to be given the opportunity to provide feedback on a preliminary version of the review report and to propose that any factual inaccuracies be rectified through the process.

4.3.5. Formal Outcomes and Decision
When necessary, the governing body ought to render a determination in accordance with the assessment report and the recommendation therein, taking into account the higher education institutions' comments as deemed pertinent. If an accreditation decision is reached as a consequence of the review, the accreditation is

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either granted or denied (with or without conditions) in accordance with the Standards (section 4.2). In addition to the formal outcome and accreditation decision, the agency may provide recommendations. The agency's accreditation decision should be supported by justifications. This is especially true in situations involving accreditation decisions that are subject to conditions or negative decisions, as well as situations in which the final decision contradicts the review panel's recommendation and conclusions.

5. Challenges in assuring the quality of joint degree programs

Quality assurance in international joint degree programs presents several challenges, primarily stemming from the diversity of educational systems, cultural contexts, and regulatory frameworks involved.

The monitoring and oversight of quality assurance and accreditation at the institutional and policy level appear to be the most complex and least supervised parts. The nature of transnational collaborations in education is characterized by the challenge of controlling and guaranteeing the quality of programs delivered by foreign providers (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015). Furthermore, a 2011 international survey conducted by the Institute of International Education highlights the absence of effective strategies and internal regulations as key challenges in the implementation and management of joint programs (Obst &Kuder, 2012). According to a survey conducted by Obst and Kuder (2012), there are 245 institutions across 28 countries that offer joint programs. However, the survey findings indicate that the institutions' motivation to develop collaborative programs is not consistently reflected in their policies and recruitment efforts. Instead, the implementation of these programs is primarily carried out at the departmental level rather than at the institutional level.

It is acknowledged that there is a dilemma for both the quality assurance organizations and the higher education institutions when it comes to the accreditation and quality assurance of joint programs. The fact that the program is organized by higher education institutions that come from a variety of higher education systems and that each of these systems has its own system of external quality assurance is the primary challenge that appears to be the most challenging. A strain is placed on joint programs as a result of this circumstance since they are required to fulfill all of the expectations that are derived from the many national contexts and legal requirements, which can often be in conflict with one another (ECA, 2013).

Accrediting international joint degree programs is challenging because of the intricate nature of interactions across borders and the variety of regulatory frameworks in different nations. Ensuring compliance of the joint degree program with the accreditation standards of each participating institution and applicable accrediting authorities can be a complicated task. Variances in accreditation requirements, evaluation procedures, and recognition frameworks among nations may necessitate meticulous coordination and negotiation. The option to select a foreign quality assurance agency for accrediting a program. Accreditation recognition occurs when a foreign agency evaluates the program. Cost for the assessment and certification process of a collaborative program (Juknytė-Petreikienė, 2017).

Finally, Juknytė-Petreikienė et al. (2017) summarise major challenges in assuring the quality of joint degree programs as below:

- Different national legislation, which includes distinct national standards, and diverse bureaucracies responsible for accrediting procedures among countries of the joint degree programs.
- Insufficient understanding of the quality assurance of joint degree programs.
- The absence of confidence in higher education systems and skepticism towards foreign quality assurance bodies give rise to problems at a global scale.
- The quality assurance agencies lack flexibility and leadership in their approach to being open and acquiring fresh experience in the quality assurance of joint initiatives.
- The insufficiency of expertise in the field of joint programmes, coupled with the subpar quality of the reviewers and their mindset.
- The varying interpretations of terms such as "joint degree", "double degree", and "just partners" across different countries lead to international misunderstandings.
- The development, evaluation, and accreditation of joint degree programs incur significant expenditures in terms of both time and fees.
- The absence of prioritization of joint degree programmes by national authorities and higher education institutions establishes a detrimental cycle, wherein policy-makers lack motivation and there is an insufficient number of collaborative programmes to generate a significant impact.

6. Conclusion

Prioritizing quality assurance in international joint degree programs is crucial for guaranteeing the legitimacy, efficiency, and long-term viability of these collaborative educational initiatives. After conducting a thorough review of the literature, we have identified numerous important themes and factors that provide insight

into the complex nature of quality assurance in this particular setting. Specifically, the study summarizes the concepts and historical development of joint degree programs, synthesizes internal and external quality assurance of joint degree programs and analyzes challenges in assuring the quality of joint degree programs.

In spite of the fact that joint degree programs have the capacity to significantly enhance students' educational experiences and promote global cooperation and comprehension, guaranteeing quality assurance continues to be a difficult and multifarious undertaking. Institutions can optimise the advantages for students, institutions, and society as a whole through the enhancement of joint degree programmes' quality and credibility, achieved through the establishment of transparent frameworks, promotion of collaboration, embrace of innovation, and resolution of more extensive concerns such as student support and cultural integration. However, in order to effectively address emerging challenges and navigate the ever-changing landscape of international higher education, continuous vigilance, flexibility, and adaptability are crucial. By means of collaborative endeavors and a mutual dedication to ensuring high standards, joint degree programs at the international level can persist in stimulating advancements, novel ideas, and worldwide involvement within the realm of higher education.

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