

Single Accreditation of Joint Programmes: Pilots Evaluation Report



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european consortium for accreditation

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1. Introduction

This report is an outcome of the project Joint Programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees (JOQAR) awarded. The overall purpose of the JOQAR project is to ensure that joint programmes are facilitated in two specific areas: accreditation/external quality assurance (QA) and recognition. The project partners - ten quality assurance agencies and four recognition bodies - have thus decided to look into QA of joint programmes and recognition of degrees awarded by these programmes. This report looks into the QA of joint programmes and particularly in the pilots for single accreditation procedures that were set up. Each of these pilots procedures were coordinated by one agency (a JOQAR project partner) with support from the ECA Secretariat which acted as a Coordination Point for these single accreditation procedures. The pilots procedures were also meant to test and improve the functioning of the Coordination Point for future single accreditation procedures.

The previous ECA project – TEAM II - has pointed out that the organisation of an external QA procedure regarding joint programmes can be quite complicated and that the agencies involved need very specialised information and expertise. The response of the JOQAR project to this need is the establishment of a **Coordination Point**, which will provide information on the quality assurance of joint programmes and information on recognition of degrees awarded from joint programmes. In addition, the JOQAR project addressed the issues raised in the European Commission's report on progress in quality assurance in higher education (September 2009)¹, notably in its section 4.3 “A stronger European dimension in quality assurance”.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc/report09_en.pdf

"National quality assurance agencies should be encouraged to develop activities beyond their borders and to seek the recognition of their decisions in other countries, e.g. through conventions of mutual recognition. [...] There may be a need to clarify the portability of national accreditation within the EHEA and also the issue of quality assurance for cross-border higher education within the EHEA. Given the growing importance of joint and double degree courses in Europe, clear principles might be useful to avoid the need for multiple accreditations".

In this sense, the project partners see this project as a direct response to the Commission's report. JOQAR is meant to clarify the issues of quality assurance across borders, specifically relating to joint programmes.

The Coordination Point should coordinate the accreditation of joint programmes at the request of quality assurance agencies or institutions providing joint programmes. The Coordination Point can bring agencies and institutions together, facilitate in planning the procedure and provide a specific methodology for carrying out single accreditation procedures. The Coordination Point can also provide advice to agencies and institutions on how single cross-border quality assurance and accreditation procedures of joint programmes can lead to formal results in the different countries.

To achieve these objectives the following steps were undertaken:

Feasibility study: In order to customise the Coordination Point as much as possible to the needs of the joint programmes and the quality assurance agencies, the current state of affairs among coordinators of joint programmes and quality assurance and accreditation agencies was investigated. The resulting report² established what kind of information and/or assistance on quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of degrees a Coordination Point should provide regarding joint programmes. The results of the study indicate a strong demand amongst both the joint programmes and the QA agencies for a

² [http://www.ecahe.eu/w/index.php/A_coordination_point_for_joint_programmes - Feasibility Study](http://www.ecahe.eu/w/index.php/A_coordination_point_for_joint_programmes_-_Feasibility_Study)

more coordinated, European approach and underpin the foundation of a Coordination Point regarding joint programmes.

Assessment Framework for single accreditation procedures: Accreditation and quality assurance of joint programmes is a challenge for both the higher education institutions and the quality assurance agencies. The main apparent difficulty is the fact that the programme is organised by higher education institutions from different higher education systems and that each of these systems have their own systems of external quality assurance. This situation creates a burden for joint programmes that need to meet all the expectations arising from these different (and sometimes contradictory) national contexts and legal requirements.

The European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) aims to facilitate the recognition of accreditation decisions across borders. In its assessment framework for joint programmes, ECA intends to substitute the different national accreditation procedures by one single accreditation procedure that can lead to several national accreditation decisions. The single accreditation procedure intends to assess the joint programme as a whole. The results of this procedure, i.e. the self-evaluation, the site visit and the assessment report, are used for accreditation purposes by the relevant national agencies of the higher education systems in which the joint programme is offered. The developed single procedure includes all elements of the joint offering of the programme.

The assessment framework³ has been developed to assess joint programmes in one single accreditation procedure. When developing this framework, ECA's Principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes⁴ were taken into account.

The initially elaborated framework consists of two building blocks: the European shared component and the relevant national components.

³ <http://www.ecahe.eu/w/index.php/JOQAR#Achievements>

⁴ Principles approved by ECA in Berlin on 14 June 2007; <http://www.ecahe.eu/home/about/eca-documents/main-documents-for-mutual-recognition/>

- The **European shared component**⁵ covers the essential core elements that need to be taken into account in all pilot single accreditation procedures. The standards, criteria and the procedure were elaborated in the framework of consultations with quality assurance agencies participating in the JOQAR project. These consultations had been organised by Working Group 1 of ECA - *Mutual recognition and joint programmes*. These consultations were followed by a two-day workshop where the shared component was finalised. Both coordinating agencies and coordinators of the concerned Erasmus Mundus programmes attended the workshop.
- The **national components** on the other hand cover particular (sub)national legal requirements. These national components refer to the elements of the assessment criteria and/or the assessment procedure that need to be included in an external quality assurance and/or accreditation procedure in a specific national or subnational higher education system. Where relevant, this means that these elements need to be addressed by the joint programme in the self-evaluation report, by the quality assurance agency in the organisation of the procedure and by the assessment panel in their assessment report. All agencies in countries of the pilot procedures (please see below) have been asked to propose additional national criteria that they found necessary to add. Some agencies found the shared European criteria sufficient and did not want to include additional criteria. They could also contribute to the single accreditation procedure in other ways, e.g. by proposing an expert or an observer from the agency to the site visit. The lightest way of involving agencies was to inform them about the procedure and the outcomes. In all cases it was made clear at the start of the procedure that there was the hope (and because of the agencies' involvement also the expectation) that the agencies would accept the result of the procedure as the basis for their own decision-making. You can find the list and descriptions of the national components at this link⁶.

⁵ See Annex 1

⁶ http://www.ecahe.eu/w/index.php/National_components_for_the_assessment_of_joint_programmes_in_single_accreditation_procedures

Joint programmes in pilot procedures were assessed both according to the elements included in the European shared component and the suggested national components.

The European shared component includes two parts: the assessment criteria and the assessment procedure. The procedure covers the self-evaluation by the joint programme (i.e. the self-evaluation report and the documentation required), the composition of the panel, the organisation of the site visit and the assessment report. For each of the four pilots one of the JOQAR partners acted as coordinating agency. The Coordination Point set up by the ECA Secretariat provided support and guidance to the agencies, the joint programmes and the panels during the pilot procedures. One aim of the pilot procedures was to test the approach taken by the Coordination Point in accordance with the work flow charts and the methodology for accrediting joint programmes.

In the framework of the feasibility study the coordinators of Erasmus Mundus joint Master programmes had the opportunity to manifest their interest to act as **pilot procedures** and to undergo a single accreditation procedure. Some thirty joint programmes showed their interest. Four Erasmus Mundus joint Master programmes were selected by the JOQAR Steering Group for participation in the pilot procedures. This selection was implemented in a way to guarantee a variety of academic disciplines and a fair geographical representation of the agencies participating in the JOQAR project. Another selection criterion was the experience of the joint programmes with external quality assurance; there should be both little as extensive QA experience so that the reality of joint programmes would be accurately reflected.

The four selected pilots procedures, their coordinating agency and the other involved agencies were:

1. European Master in Quality in Analytical Laboratories (EMQAL):

- University of Algarve, Portugal
- University of Barcelona, Spain
- University of Bergen, Norway
- University of Cadiz, Spain
- Gdansk University of Technology, Poland

- Central South University, China

Coordinating agency: AQU Catalunya (Spain)

Involved agencies: A3ES (Portugal), ANECA (Spain), NOKUT (Norway), PKA (Poland)

2. Erasmus Mundus Master of Science in Marine Biodiversity and Conservation (EMBC)

- Ghent University, Belgium
- University of Bremen, Germany
- University of the Algarve, Portugal
- University of Pierre and Marie Curie - Paris 6, France
- University of Oviedo, Spain
- University of Klaipeda, Lithuania

Coordinating agency: AQAS (Germany)

Involved agencies: NVAO (Netherlands/Flanders), A3ES (Portugal), AERES (France), ANECA (Spain), SKVC (Lithuania)

3. European Master in Migration and Intercultural Relations (EMMIR)

- University of Oldenburg, Germany
- Ahfad University for Women, Omdurman, Sudan
- Makerere University Kampala, Uganda
- Mbarara University of Science & Technology, Uganda
- University of Nova Gorica, Slovenia
- University of South Bohemia, Czech Republic
- University of Stavanger, Norway

Coordinating agency: SQAA (Slovenia)

Involved agencies: AQAS (Germany), Accreditation Commission (Czech Republic), NOKUT (Norway)

4. Erasmus Mundus Master Course in Law and Economics (EMLE)

- Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- University of Gent, Belgium
- Hamburg University, Germany
- University Paul Cezanne, Aix/Marseille 3, France
- University of Bologna, Italy
- University of Vienna, Austria
- Haifa University, Israel
- Warsaw School of Economics, Poland
- Indira Ghandi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR), Mumbai, India

Coordinating agency: NVAO

Involved agencies: CHE (Israel), ZEvA (Germany), ANVUR (Italy),

NAAC (India), AERES (France), AQ Austria, PKA (Poland)

The pilot procedures started with the submission of **self-evaluation reports**. A self-evaluation report **outline**, provided by the Coordination Point, facilitated the presentation of the outcomes of the joint programme's self-evaluation procedure and made this information easily accessible for the experts in the assessment panel. Joint programmes needed to take into consideration the relevant national components and, where relevant, include these in the self-evaluation report. A self-evaluation report had to cover the totality of the joint programme. All the consortium partners should therefore be included in the self-evaluation procedure and the preparation of the self-evaluation report. As is clear from the assessment criteria, this report should put appropriate emphasis on the "jointness" of the programme. In the self-evaluation report, the joint programme should demonstrate how it meets all the criteria of the European shared component and the relevant national component(s). Additionally, the self-evaluation report contained basic information about the joint programme and relevant annexes.

The **composition of the assessment panel** was implemented via selection of experts in line with ECA's Principles for the selection of experts⁷. Assessment panels consisted of at least four members, of whom one was a student. Each panel had to include the following mix of expertise:

- Experts with prominent subject-/discipline-specific expertise;
- Expert(s) with experience in quality assurance in higher education;
- Expert(s) with international experience/expertise;
- Experts with knowledge of at least some of the countries in which the joint programme is offered.

The quality assurance agencies of the higher education systems in which the joint programme is offered could suggest experts for the procedure. The coordinating agencies presented their proposals for the composition of the panel to the Coordination Point. The

⁷ Principles approved by ECA in Dublin on 2 June 2005; <http://www.ecahe.eu/home/about/eca-documents/main-documents-for-mutual-recognition/>

final panel composition was then agreed. The assessment panels were subsequently convened by the coordinating agencies. The other relevant agencies could also propose observers to the site visit. There could be a maximum of two observers per site visit. The final decision concerning the observers was taken by the Coordination Point in consultation with the coordinating agencies.

The **site visit** allowed the assessment panel to discuss the self-evaluation report with the joint programme and to interview the stakeholders and representatives of the joint programme. The site visit therefore included representatives of the partners who were able to present the totality of the joint programme across all sites. In some cases, video conferencing could be used to extend the range of persons to be interviewed by the assessment panel.

The choice for the site visit location depended on several elements (e.g. the location of the coordinating institution). There was a need however to find the right balance between logistical efficiency and procedural necessity. As a general recommendation it was advised to organise the site visit at the moment of a consortium meeting. The practical organisation of the site visits (such as the agenda) followed the coordinating agency's guidelines.

A template for the panel's assessment report was provided by the Coordination Point. This template covered the elements included in the European shared component of this framework. The assessment panels needed to take into consideration the relevant national components included in the joint programmes' self-evaluation reports. Where relevant, these national elements had to be accordingly assessed and incorporated into their reports. The assessment panels were expected to present for each of the criteria their (objective) findings, (subjective) considerations and conclusions. Assessment panels were expected to include in their reports recommendations, which would enable the joint programme to improve where possible. Finally, the assessment report contained the assessment panels' overall conclusions. This formed the basis for all relevant agencies to take decisions. The coordinating agencies facilitated the writing of the assessment report. The joint programmes had the opportunity to respond to factual inaccuracies in the draft

panel reports. The final version of the assessment report was send to the Coordination Point, which sent these to the other relevant quality assurance agencies and asked when their decisions would be taken. The final panel reports of the pilot procedures are publicly available on the ECA website.

The accreditation decisions will be taken by each of the quality assurance agencies individually and according to their national legislation. These decisions should be based on the outcome of the single accreditation procedure.

The coordinating agency first communicates their intended accreditation decision to the Coordination Point, which supports its recognition by other relevant quality assurance agencies.

The overall aim is that similar accreditation decisions are taken by all the quality assurance agencies involved. When questions or issues arise that might lead to different accreditation decisions, the Coordination Point can be asked to organise a consultation and coordination procedure among the relevant quality assurance agencies.

In case the consortium or a consortium partner would like to lodge an appeal against an accreditation decision taken by one of the quality assurance agencies, the initial framework prescribed that this should be done according to the guidelines and requirements of that quality assurance agency.

In the following sections of this document we will critically assess and formulate recommendations regarding:

- The assessment framework
- The single accreditation procedure
- The organisation of the Coordination Point, including a refined work flow chart.

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2. Lessons learned

The live experience gained during the pilot procedures was further reinforced by valuable feedback collected through an anonymous survey⁸ among the participating quality assurance agencies, experts and joint programmes. Three types of evaluation forms were elaborated by the Coordination Point to the attention of the coordinating quality assurance agencies, joint programme coordinators and panel experts having participated in the pilots. The content was reviewed and refined by the Accreditation and Stakeholders' groups of the JOQAR project. In total, 23 evaluation forms were received and processed by the Coordination Point.

In the following sections of this document, we are going to examine the functioning of the following elements: Self-Evaluation Report (SER) template; assessment report template; and the relevance of the supporting documents in the light of the experience gained during the pilot procedures and of the feedback collected through the survey mentioned above. We will then draw suggestions for improvements for the revision of the framework.

2.1. Relevance of the framework

According to the Joint Programme Coordinators (JPC), the framework was helpful for the writing of the self-evaluation report. The standards proved to be relevant from both the national and the European point of view. Some found it confusing that the numbering of chapters in the framework interfered with the numbering of sections to be included in the self-evaluation report. Overall the JPCs agree that the framework provides adequate and clear information. They emphasised the high relevance of the framework. This is due in their understanding to the fact that the framework was designed specifically for assessing joint programmes which is naturally not the case of national frameworks. In opposition to national formats assuming that courses are offered by one single higher education institution, the JOQAR framework allows the panel to evaluate the quality of the joint programme as a whole and it stimulates the joint programmes to describe clearly some

⁸ See Annex 2 for the survey questions.

unique aspects of their programme. The JOQAR framework in the perception of the JPC is therefore sufficiently wide and flexible to allow a clear and complete description of the programme. However, the high level of detail and the limited length of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) could according to joint programme coordinators impede the expression of valuable features, which are not explicitly defined by the JOQAR framework.

According to the experts the national components⁹ were the most difficult to assess and constituted a serious obstacle. The following three situations could occur:

- a) **National components of involved agencies contradict each other.** E.g. formal requirements regarding the thesis of a Master programme. In Germany it should range between 15 to 30 ECTS, while in Portugal it should be worth at least 35% of the total number of ECTS of the programme (e.g. 42 credits in a programme of 120 credits).
- b) **Experts participating in the panel are not familiar with all national assessment frameworks involved.** E.g. the assessment scale in the Netherlands: The assessment panel needs to come to a general conclusion regarding the joint programme. This general conclusion is either unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or excellent and needs to be weighted and substantiated. An expert argues: “I find the distinction between good and excellent less than straightforward since it seems to some extent it is context dependent, and can be dependent on the number of partners – do ALL have to show excellence for the aspect under consideration or is it the overall ‘jointness’ that has to be excellent?”.
- c) **National components do not take into account the transnational nature and are not adapted for evaluation of a joint programme.** E.g. requirements regarding the composition of staff in terms of numbers, academic titles and experience. In Poland for example the minimum core staff consists of at least six teachers, which hold the academic title of professor or “*doktor habilitowany*” and six PhD holders. The members of the minimum core staff have to be full-time employees of the higher education institution that offers the joint programme, and at least since the

⁹ http://www.ecahe.eu/w/index.php/National_components_for_the_assessment_of_joint_programmes_in_single_accreditation_procedures

beginning of the semester. This institution has to be their primary employer. Each member of the minimum core staff has to teach at least 30 (for a professor or “*doktor habilitowany*”) or 60 hours of class during the academic year and within the programme. Another example of not taking into account the transnational nature of joint programmes in national procedures was the following comment from one of the joint programme coordinators: “...we have had serious difficulties filling self-evaluation reports for national agencies. This follows a rigid format which assumes courses are offered by one single university: not only it cannot evaluate the quality of the joint course as a whole, but also it is not possible in this format to describe clearly some unique aspects of the course. The JOQAR framework, on the other hand, was sufficiently wide and sufficiently flexible to allow a clear and complete description of the course.”

In most assessed joint programmes, the framework and the preparation of the self-evaluation report brought about internal discussions about the level of “jointness” of the programme and thus contributed to the quality enhancement of the assessed programmes. For example, in one case, these discussions facilitated the raise of awareness among the members of the Erasmus Mundus consortium regarding the organisational and structural difficulties that can arise from divergent national requirements. Regarding structural aspects, the framework and the reflexions due to the writing of the SER helped to improve the clarity of the internal documentation and records. According to the JPCs these improvements will be valuable to provide adequate evidence during future evaluations. In the case of another pilot, these reflexions helped to identify better ways to monitor teaching and grading activities implemented across the consortium.

According to the experts and the agencies, the framework and guidelines are clear on the whole. However, divergent understanding of definitions may occur among the experts, due to variations in approaches to assessment in different countries. E.g. some experts deemed the criterion 1c “Added value” particularly difficult to assess. Therefore, Workshops/trainings for experts are highly recommended. It could also be valuable to have an introduction session before the assessment. If single accreditation procedures of joint

programmes become a wider practice, a specific pool with trained and experienced experts for such processes could be a benefit.

According to the experts it should also be made clearer what kind of evidence is expected from the programmes regarding the learning outcomes.

2.2. Self-Evaluation Report Guidelines

All JPCs reported that they found the self-evaluation report guidelines very useful for writing the self-evaluation report. These guidelines provided a common basis for communication regarding the quality of the joint programme.

According to the coordinating agencies, the guidelines for writing Self-Evaluation Reports (SERs) should be further elaborated in order to: allow programmes to distinguish between their national accreditations and the Assessment Framework for Joint Programmes; favour self-reflexion; further clarify the criteria of the Assessment Framework for Joint Programmes and expectations.

2.3. Assessment report template

The experts agree that all in all the assessment report template was an essential tool that proved to be useful. More focus on quality enhancement could be recommended, though. Some suggested to include examples into the template. One expert signalled a slight lack of clarity of the template as some of the panel comments had to be relocated.

2.4. Preparation for the procedure

For the most part the agencies deem that the joint programmes were well prepared. However some lack of preparation was due to:

- Insufficient communication with the coordinating agency,
- Too little time available to write the SER and to prepare the site visit.

JPCs advise to notify the deadline for the self-evaluation report and to plan the site visit well in advance to minimise costs and increase efficiency. If possible the site visit should coincide in time with the annual meeting of the consortium to facilitate the availability of all actors concerned.

According to JPCs, the support from internal quality departments was quite limited. This is mainly due to the specific aspects of joint programmes with which these departments are not prepared to deal. Some of the joint programmes had their own internal quality assurance mechanisms, which are in place across the consortium. The contribution of other national quality assurance agencies was also limited and concerned mainly the fulfilment of national components.

The investment in terms of time was difficult to estimate and is overall qualified as important by the JPCs. An average rough estimate would be 30-45 days FTE.

It is necessary that national quality assurance agencies and internal quality assurance departments play an active role in providing adequate support to the assessed programmes.

2.5. Site-visits

JPCs qualified the site visits as very productive altogether. The time schedule was followed, the experts' teams were friendly and the communication was easy and efficient.

The experts' teams were very helpful and pointed to possible improvements that would otherwise be unnoticed. E.g. in one case: using social media (LinkedIn) to keep track of alumni, creating a common repository in the consortium for student grades, clarifying documentation regarding the link between the taught modules and learning outcomes and pointing at some missing information in the documentation. Two JPCs signalled problems due to the timeframe of the visits. They recommended defining the date for the site visits at least 6 months in advance to assure the presence of all relevant persons.

An expert recommended to circulate the draft of the programme of the site visit among experts before making it final.

2.6. Modus operandi of the panel

Most experts consider the composition of the panel one of the strongest points of the procedure. The experience of panel members was well balanced between expertise in the discipline, expertise in the assessment at programme level and students' needs. A guide explaining the distribution of responsibilities (tasks) among panel members could be

useful. Several experts agree that a specific training of experts is needed. Some experts want to distribute responsibility for different standards/criteria among the members of the panel. Several experts expressed a wish for an online collaborative platform where all working documents can be uploaded.

On the whole the panels functioned well according to the agencies. However, in most pilots there was more or less significant divergence in understanding and interpreting the standards. All participating agencies agree that a specific preparation/training is needed for the experts in order to guarantee a more homogenous interpretation of the framework.

2.7. Clarity of the assessment rules

According to the agencies the assessment rules were clear and all panel members were aware of them, but the implementation of these suffered from differences in interpretation and from the lack of clarity of the grading scale.

The four points assessment scale does not seem appropriate for all standards/criteria. Some agencies used the scale only at standard level. From the experts' point of view, if the differences between satisfactory, good and excellent quality of the joint programme does not seem a major problem, some panel members did have difficulties understanding and applying these. Further explanation of these scales has to be included in expert trainings.

For the sake of clarity the assessment scale should be articulated in a 3 points scale (unsatisfactory, satisfactory, excellent) rather than in a 4 points scale, which initially also included "good". Indeed, the pilot procedures demonstrated clearly that this could be subject to controversies amongst the agencies due to divergent national frameworks.

2.8. Choice of the interviewees

Both the agencies and the experts find the choice of the interviewees sound overall. It is strongly recommended to:

- Systematically include in the interviews professionals from the field, preferably employers
- Encourage participation of different staff members to site visit meetings

- Always give an oral feedback to the assessed programme by the end of the visit.

2.9. Final decision-making

Coordinating agencies indicate that overall the decision-making process was smooth without any difficulties. However they put forward the need to explain internally in much detail the ECA framework and the assessment report format to enable the decision. One agency stressed the fact that avoiding national components facilitated significantly the final decision-making. Although a number of decisions have been taken the decision-making is not finalised at the moment when the present report is written. You can access the current state of decision-making at the following link¹⁰.

2.10. Interacting with the Coordination Point

Overall the communication with the Coordination point was perceived by the participating agencies as efficient. However, the agencies expressed a need for more structure in communication and support: website, flowchart, a clearer definition of roles and responsibilities in the process.

2.11. Assessment of not visited locations

According to the experts, the lack of assessment of other locations was not a problem. The information provided by the joint programme (presentations, videos, documents) and the testimonials provided by students and alumni were sufficient. It is of higher importance that students or alumni from other consortium locations can be interviewed during the site visit. One expert recommended that the national agencies of the locations that are not visited prepare a report to facilitate the assessment.

¹⁰ http://www.ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Current_state_of_accreditation_decisions_concerning_JOQAR_pilots

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3. Recommendations

On the basis of the evaluation results and the findings collected during the pilot procedures the following recommendations are made:

1. The European shared component in the framework has been tested and is deemed highly relevant. The criterion 1c “Added value” should remain in the framework. A more thorough explanation should be provided regarding the assessment of this criterion.
2. Removal of national components: all participating agencies agree that national components are the major obstacle to be dealt with. International experts find such additional criteria difficult to assess. Such national criteria should be removed. It is recommended that, regarding joint programmes, national governments authorise the acceptance of results from single accreditation procedures for national accreditation decisions without the obligation to comply with additional national criteria. You can find the list and the descriptions of the national components at this link¹¹.
3. A three points assessment scale –unsatisfactory/satisfactory/excellent –should be used in the revised version of the framework.
4. The guidelines for writing Self-Evaluation Reports (SERs) should be further elaborated.
5. National quality assurance agencies and internal quality assurance departments of HEIs offering joint programmes should be encouraged to provide more support to the assessed joint programmes.

¹¹ http://www.ecahe.eu/w/index.php/National_components_for_the_assessment_of_joint_programmes_in_single_accreditation_procedures

6. A pool with trained and experienced experts for the assessment of joint programmes should be set up.
7. The coordinating agencies advocated that the coordination role of the Coordination Point is strengthened, that responsibilities of different parties are better described, and that an improved template for the assessment report is being developed.
8. It is important that employers, and also students or alumni from other consortium locations are interviewed during the site visit.
9. A European appeals procedure and committee for single accreditation procedures of joint programmes setup by ECA should be considered.
10. Harmonisation of the duration of accreditation validity for all joint programmes undergoing a single accreditation procedure. The period of validity of accreditation decisions differs among countries. In case of joint programmes accredited in different countries an awkward situation may occur where a programme's accreditation would be valid in one country and no longer valid in another. Therefore two possible solutions are suggested:
 - a. Minimum common denominator: This is a quick-win short-term solution consisting in conferring to a joint programme an accreditation of which the validity equals the shortest national accreditation validity duration among the involved quality assurance agencies.
 - b. A fixed period of validity defined in the assessment framework is seen as a more sustainable and long-term solution. It is suggested to accredit joint programmes for the period of 6 years. This duration is the average duration based on most common practices implemented by national accreditation bodies. It must be assured that an appropriate transposal into national legislations enforces the use of this period of validity for joint programmes assessed according single accreditation procedures.

4. Coordination point: tasks and workflow

4.1. Overview

The initial articulation of the Coordination Point was based on an ECA investigation of the current state of affairs among coordinators of joint programmes and quality assurance and accreditation agencies. A survey¹² at the start of the JOQAR project, which was part of the feasibility study regarding the Coordination Point, clearly demonstrated a strong demand amongst both the joint programmes and the quality assurance agencies for a more coordinated, European approach.

The Coordination Point assisted institutions and quality assurance and accreditation agencies involved in the pilot procedures regarding the single accreditation procedures. In the framework of the pilot procedures the functioning of the Coordination Point was tuned to serve the needs of the joint programmes and the quality assurance agencies with maximal efficiency.

In practice the function of Coordination Point was executed by the ECA Secretariat. In this role it was supported and guided by Working Group 1 of ECA and in some aspects (e.g. the selection of the pilot projects) also by the JOQAR Steering Group. By the end of the pilot procedures, the involved agencies and joint programmes perceived the communication with the Coordination Point as efficient. The experience gained through the pilot procedures was very valuable in the sense that it emphasised the strengths and weaknesses of the initially proposed Coordination Point articulation and workflow.

Thus the following description of the *modus operandi* of the Coordination Point and workflow takes into account these latest findings and provides for more structure in communication and support. However, it should be kept in mind that these enhancements

¹² Aerden, A., Braathen, K. (2011) *Feasibility study: a coordination point for joint programmes*, ECA Occasional Paper, The Hague.

are by no means the final ones. The functioning of the Coordination Point is subject to continuous quality improvement and will be further enhanced, as more and more joint programmes will undergo single accreditation procedures.

After the end of the JOQAR project in October 2013 the role of Coordination Point should be fulfilled by the ECA Secretariat under the guidance and with support of Working Group 1 of ECA.

It is now essential to define the role of the Coordination Point carefully. The Coordination Point will offer information, which is relevant for joint programmes, and coordinate single accreditation procedures of joint programmes in cooperation with QA agencies. We will now examine these tasks in the sections below.

4.2. Provision of information

The survey results at the start of the JOQAR project (see 4.1) showed that a large proportion of the joint programme coordinators found external quality assurance of joint programmes challenging, and that they struggled to collect all the information required. Until now the coordinators used mainly national information sources when searching for information about external quality assurance requirements for their joint programme. This fact contradicts somehow the otherwise international characteristics of the joint programmes. The agencies too, used mainly national sources of information (agencies, ministries, ENIC/NARICs etc.). On the whole, the information on an overarching / European level was lacking.

A number of innovative online tools articulated in a new comprehensive joint programmes portal on the ECA website will provide solutions to this challenge through a range of services: ECapedia, Qrossroads and the European Experts Exchange platform described below. For each of the services we will cover the service's aim and the target audience.

Transparent information provision regarding joint programmes is the fundamental principle of the information provision implemented by the Coordination Point.

All stakeholders including potential students can be informed about all the Erasmus Mundus programmes via the Qrossroads service. The service integrates all programmes (including –where available– learning outcomes) and institutional details into an online database with a special search function to find Erasmus Mundus master’s programmes and to search through portal web pages.

Qrossroads	
Url:	http://www.qrossroads.eu
Aim:	Qrossroads makes qualifications from accredited and quality assured programmes and institutions visible for international users according to a common format. These qualifications are presented in the perspective of the higher education system(s) of which it is part together with information on the relevant QA agencies and recognition authorities. Qrossroads brings together information from the different databases of the quality assurance and accreditation agencies.
Target audience:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General Public - Stakeholders: QA agencies, recognition bodies, students, HEIs, researchers, professionals in internationalisation of higher education, employers

In addition, the portal brings *together all background information helpful for joint programmes and quality assurance agencies*. This refers to issues such as higher education systems, quality assurance regimes and joint degrees legislation. This is implemented through a Joint Programmes portal with information regarding joint programmes on a developed wiki-system: the ECapedia.

ECApedia	
Url:	http://www.ecapedia.net
Aim:	ECApedia is a Mediawiki, which brings together background information helpful and valuable for higher education stakeholders. A portal relating to joint programmes is included in ECApedia, as are other portals (i.e. training of experts and QA resources).
Target audience:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General Public - Stakeholders: QA agencies, recognition bodies, experts in QA procedures, students, HEIs, researchers, and professionals in QA and internationalisation of higher education. These stakeholders may also contribute to the ECApedia by writing and editing articles.

For quality assurance agencies, it is of great importance to find the right experts for procedures regarding joint programmes. The joint programmes portal is therefore *linked on the ECA website to the database of trained and experienced experts*: the ECA Experts Exchange Portal (EEEP).

ECA Experts Exchange Platform (EEEP)	
Url:	http://www.expertsplatform.eu
Aim:	The EEEP is intended to facilitate locating experts, publishing experts' background in panel reports, and sharing of (trained/experienced) experts across borders. The EEEP provides searchable, easy access information to experts' profiles according to a common format. The experts' profiles include information on personal details and CV, language skills, experience in academia/HE, professional experience, QA experience, QA training received.
Target audience:	QA experts (involved in QA procedures) and staff members of QA agencies (looking for experts in QA procedures).

These distinct services - ECApedia, Qrossroads and ECA Experts Exchange Platform –are integrated in a transparent manner on the ECA website. Through this approach the services are simultaneously accessible in one place, share the same visual identity, and

offer users a single unified login. Thanks to this common graphic identity the user benefits from the overall visual attractiveness, usability and clarity.

ECA Website	
Url:	http://www.ecahe.eu
Aim:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide information on aims and organisation of ECA, on current projects, documents, and activities - Announce news - Manage meetings and events - Allow collaboration among ECA Management Group, Working Groups, and Project Groups including blogs
Target audience:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General Public - Stakeholders: QA agencies, recognition bodies, experts in QA procedures, students, HEIs, researchers, and professionals in QA and internationalisation of higher education. - Members of Management, Working and Project Groups

Furthermore, on the ECA website there is the opportunity for stakeholders to ask concrete questions about QA or recognition of joint programmes. The Coordination Point will then forward these questions to the appropriate contact person.

4.3. Coordination

The Coordination Point:

- Provides advice and support to joint programmes and agencies on how to carry out a single accreditation procedure of a joint programme
- Provides a methodology and
- Organises an exchange of good practices (including overall analysis of reports) in this respect.
- Carries out trainings of experts for single accreditation procedures of joint programmes

The Coordination Point cannot carry out the actual procedures itself, as these are linked to national competencies and agencies, but it links programmes and agencies together and assists the process during the three phases of the procedure: Orientation, Assessment and

Decision-Making. For a graphical representation, please refer to the **workflow chart** in Annex 3.

Orientation Phase	
Aim:	Provide guidance and coordination to the interested joint programme and the involved agencies in order to establish whether the joint programme should follow the MULTRA recognition route or the single accreditation route. In the latter case – a coordinating QA agency will be found.
Implementation:	<p>During the initial stage of the orientation phase the Coordination Point provides general guidance and documentation to joint programmes and interested quality assurance agencies through the ECA online tools: Qcrossroads and ECAspedia.</p> <p>Furthermore, the Coordination Point provides specific coordination, guidance and support to joint programmes and interested quality assurance agencies in determining whether a joint programme should undergo a MULTRA recognition or single accreditation procedure. In case the joint programme is already accredited by a signatory agency of MULTRA, it can follow a simplified procedure - the MULTRA recognition procedure and reach the transposition of the existing accreditation decision into national decisions by other involved signatories of MULTRA according to their respective legislations (please refer to the Decision-Making Phase table below and to the workflow chart in the Annex 3).</p> <p>If the joint programme has not yet been accredited or has been accredited by an agency which has not joined MULTRA yet, then the Coordination Point will assist the interested joint programme and the involved agencies in selecting the coordinating agency for the single accreditation procedure. This can be one of the involved national agencies or even a third agency having a more thorough experience in the assessment of joint programmes.</p>
Means of support by the Coordination Point:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidance - Coordination

Assessment Phase	
Aim:	Establish an assessment by an international panel as a basis for accreditation decisions.
Implementation:	The coordinating agency requests a SER from the joint programme, which has to be submitted within a period of 6 months. The Coordination Point assists the involved agencies with the nomination of the experts and of the observers for the panel according to the rules of the assessment framework. The Coordination Point grants the involved agencies access to its pool of specially trained experts with sound experience of accrediting of joint programmes. The coordinating agency arranges the site visit, which takes place within a 1-2 months period after the submission of the SER. The site visit results in an assessment report by the panel, which is sent to the coordinating agency. The coordination agency takes an official decision and communicates it together with the assessment report to the Coordination Point.
Means of support by the Coordination Point:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidance - Coordination - Assessment Framework for Joint Programmes - International pool of experts - Training or updating experts if necessary - Template for the Self-Evaluation Report - Template for the Assessment Report

Decision-Making Phase	
Aim:	Publication of the individual decisions by all involved national agencies, according to their respective national legislations
Implementation:	<p>The Coordination Point receives the decision of the coordinating agency (or from a MULTRA agency in case of the MULTRA route) and supports its recognition by the involved quality assurance agencies. Each national agency publishes its own decision according to its national legislation. The final decisions are communicated to the joint programme. The Coordination Point will then include the joint programme in the Qrossroads database.</p> <p>Appeal: <i>In case of disagreement by the joint programme consortium with the decision, it may lodge an appeal to the ECA Appeals Committee, which reviews the compliance of the procedure with the defined framework. The ECA Appeals Committee will formulate a recommendation and send it to the Coordination Point, which will support its recognition by the involved quality assurance agencies.</i></p>
Means of support by the Coordination Point:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidance - Coordination - Assessment Framework for Joint Programmes - European Appeals Committee

In addition, the Coordination Point makes available a list of contacts within the agencies who already have experience with the accreditation of joint programmes and who can function as mentors for others.

5. Conclusions

Joint programmes are on the rise but they are still hindered by many obstacles regarding national QA requirements, and by difficulties in the recognition of degrees awarded by joint programmes. The JOQAR project has focused on these issues and come up with solutions, both in the recognition area (especially when awarding joint degrees)¹³ and in the QA area. It has been argued that the difficulties stemming from national QA requirements can be solved by introducing single accreditation/QA procedures. In these single procedures there is one shared European framework with the following characteristics:

- agreed standards and criteria (consisting of a shared European component and additional national components if necessary, e.g. because of national legal requirements)
- one assessment procedure comprising an international panel (for which experts can be nominated by the agencies in the countries where the joint programme is offered)
- one self-evaluation report written by the joint programme according to the European framework
- a site visit at one location of the joint programme but with representation of the other locations in the interviews
- one assessment report written by the panel
- national decisions by all agencies in the countries where the joint programme is offered on the basis of this assessment report.

So only a single procedure instead of multiple national procedures is needed. One coordinating agency carries out the single procedure, for which it receives support by the Coordination Point provided by ECA. The Coordination Point can train experts for single

¹³ See: **Aerden, A., Reczulska, H.**, (2012) *Guidelines for Good Practice for Awarding Joint Degrees*, ECA Occasional Paper, The Hague.

accreditation procedures, it can explain the methodology of the European assessment framework, and help to bring agencies together, e.g. in the decision-making phase. Making such decisions will be much easier if the agencies have already agreed to accept the results of accreditation procedures of other agencies. It would therefore be desirable if the multilateral mutual recognition agreement regarding the accreditation of joint programmes (MULTRA) would be expanded with more agencies¹⁴.

Thirty Erasmus Mundus joint Master programmes (the JOQAR project was funded under the Erasmus Mundus Action line 3 programme of the European Commission) had indicated that they were willing to participate in the JOQAR pilot single accreditation procedures. On the basis of geographical and disciplinary spread, and taking into account a mix of experiences with external QA as well as the representation of JOQAR partners, a selection of four joint programmes for the pilots was made. For each of the four pilots a coordinating agency was selected among the JOQAR partners (taking into account the countries involved in the joint programme consortium). Other QA agencies from countries involved in the consortium were approached with the question on how they would like to be involved in the procedure. One possibility was to add specific national criteria to the shared European framework, which they considered necessary for their acceptance of the results of the procedure. Most agencies indeed contributed additional national criteria, which were then included in the assessment framework as the national component. If the joint programme included institutions from these countries then these additional national criteria would also be assessed by the panel. Some agencies proposed an expert or observer whilst there were also agencies that only wanted to be informed about the results of the procedure.

The writing of the self-evaluation reports by the joint programmes, the panel composition by the agencies and the site visits at one location of each joint programme took place in 2012 (with the exception of one site visit in February 2013). There were two workshops with panel chairs, secretaries (who were staff from coordinating agencies) and the

¹⁴ For the evaluation of the observations of agencies to join MULTRA see: Thomas Blanc de la Carrere and Mark Frederiks, "JOQAR Observation Missions: Evaluation Report", 2013, ECA, The Hague.

Coordination Point. One workshop was held after the receipt of the self-evaluation and was meant to coordinate the issues raised for the site visits. The second workshop was organised after the draft assessment reports were written and was aimed at improving the consistency of these reports. At the time of writing of this evaluation report the decision-making phase is still taking place but it is already clear that in a number of cases the pilot single accreditations results have been the basis for decisions made by other agencies.

The pilot procedures were evaluated by the joint programme coordinators, the experts and the coordinating agencies. The results were also discussed by Working Group 1 of ECA. These evaluations led to a positive conclusion on the use of the standards and criteria in the European shared component. Some recommendations were made regarding a revision of the grading scale (into unsatisfactory, satisfactory, excellent) and the elaboration of guidelines for the self-evaluation report. The joint programme coordinators also expressed a desire for more support from national QA agencies and institutional QA departments in preparing the self-evaluation report. A recurrent theme in the evaluations was that the coordination of the single accreditation procedures should be strengthened. The following recommendations were made with respect to coordination issues:

- The role of the Coordination Point should be strengthened and the responsibilities of different parties (coordinating and other involved agencies, experts, etc.) and time frames better described. In this report the tasks of the Coordination Point are described, also with regard to information provision. A flow chart with an outline of different steps and responsibilities has been elaborated.
- A pool with trained experts for carrying out single accreditation procedures for joint programmes should be established. The Coordination Point should organize such trainings and assist agencies with the selection of appropriate experts.
- Instead of the possibility that joint programmes enter any complaints on decisions or procedures in multiple national appeals procedures, a European appeals procedure for joint programmes should be considered. The appeals committee could be the same as for ECA's internationalisation certificate.

- At the moment there are many different national accreditation periods making it more difficult to organise single accreditation procedures. A harmonisation of the duration of the accreditation validity for all joint programmes undergoing a single accreditation procedure should be considered. A fixed period of accreditation validity defined in the assessment framework (6 years would be most common) is seen as a sustainable long-term solution.

Although the recommendations above show that QA agencies can still do more to facilitate single accreditation procedures, the limits to what agencies can do are within sight. Not only may some recommendations (e.g. accreditation validity periods) require a change of regulations in some countries. The evaluation of the pilots also shows that very specific national criteria on top of the shared European standards and criteria hamper single accreditation procedures. There is a consensus among experts, agencies and joint programmes that the Ministers should remove obstacles in national legislations, which have been defined for national purposes but are not suitable when assessing joint programmes. Such obstacles pertain to e.g. detailed specifics regarding the credits needed for thesis work or modules, national requirements for some categories of academic staff, or the duration of the programme beyond the requirements of Bologna (e.g. the requirement in some countries of a 300 ECTS total duration of Bachelors and Masters). Such specific additional national criteria do not only hamper the accreditation and QA of joint programmes, but in some cases make it impossible for joint programmes (and joint degrees especially) to come into existence at all. An important recommendation from the JOQAR project addressed to governments is therefore to remove these specific national criteria when assessing or accrediting joint programmes, thereby honouring the commitment of Ministers to “dismantle obstacles to cooperation and mobility embedded in national contexts”¹⁵.

¹⁵ EHEA Ministerial Conference “Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area. Bucharest Communiqué”, Bucharest 2012: p. 5.

Annex 1: Shared European component of the Assessment framework

Standard 1. General conditions

Criterion 1a: Recognition

The institutions in the consortium are legally recognised as higher education institutions and their respective national legal frameworks allow them to participate in this joint programme.

If the joint programme awards a joint degree then this should be in accordance with the legislation governing the awarding institutions.

Criterion 1b: Cooperation agreement

It is clear from both the cooperation agreement and the subsequent implementation that the partners in the consortium agree on the following points:

- *Overall coordination of the programme and/or sharing of responsibilities;*
- *Admission and selection procedures for students;*
- *Mobility of students and teachers;*
- *Examination regulations, student assessment and recognition of credits in the consortium;*
- *Type of degree (joint, multiple) and awarding modalities;*
- *Teaching language(s);*
- *Coordination and responsibilities regarding internal quality assurance;*
- *Administration of student's data and performance records;*
- *Support for student mobility;*
- *Public information on the programme;*
- *Financial organisation (including sharing of costs and incomes, charging registration and/or tuition fees, grants and fellowships);*
- *Change in partnership.*

Criterion 1c: Added value

The programme can demonstrate the added value of offering this joint programme in international perspective.

Standard 2. Intended learning outcomes

Criterion 2a: Shared

The intended learning outcomes are developed and shared by all partners.

Criterion 2b: Level

The intended learning outcomes align with the corresponding level in the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (the so-called Dublin descriptors) or the European Qualifications Framework.

Criterion 2c: Subject/discipline

The intended learning outcomes comply with the requirements in the subject/discipline and, where applicable, the professional field.

Standard 3. Programme

Criterion 3a: Admission

The admission criteria and selection procedures are in line with the joint programme's level and discipline.

Criterion 3b: Structure

The structure and content of the curriculum and its pedagogical approach correspond with the intended learning outcomes.

Criterion 3c: Credits

The distribution of credits is clear.

Standard 4. Internal quality assurance system

Criterion 4a: Common understanding

There is a common understanding of the internal quality assurance system for this joint programme in which responsibilities are clearly shared and coordinated.

Criterion 4b: Stakeholder involvement

The stakeholders (students, staff, employers, graduates, etc.) are involved in the internal quality assurance activities (including graduate surveys and employability issues).

Criterion 4c: Continuous improvement

The effectiveness of the system with regard to the continuous improvement of the programme can be demonstrated.

Standard 5. Facilities and student support

Criterion 5a: Facilities

The facilities provided are sufficient and adequate in view of the intended learning outcomes.

Criterion 5b: Support

The student support provided by the joint programme contributes to the achievement of the learning outcomes and, where applicable, to designing individual study pathways.

Criterion 5c: Services

The programme provides adequate student services to facilitate mobility (e.g. housing, guidance for incoming and outgoing students, visa issues, etc.).

Standard 6. Teaching and learning

Criterion 6a: Staff

The composition of the staff (quantity, qualifications, professional and international experience, etc.) is adequate for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Criterion 6b: Assessment of students

The examination regulations and the assessment of the achievements of learning outcomes are applied in a consistent manner among partner institutions and oriented to the intended learning outcomes.

Criterion 6c: Achievement

The programme can demonstrate that the learning outcomes are achieved.

Annex 2: Evaluation forms

JOQAR pilot - Evaluation form for Programmes

Please insert your answers in the corresponding frames below

1. Do you consider the framework helpful for writing the self-evaluation?

2. Did the framework provide adequate and clear information? Do we need to assess additional elements to grasp the quality of joint programmes?

3. Were the self-evaluation report guidelines useful for writing the self-evaluation report?

4. Did the framework or the preparation of the self-evaluation report bring about internal discussions about the level of “jointness” of the programme? Can you give examples?

5. What is your experience with the site visit and the panel?

6. Did the site visit and the report add any value to your internal discussions about the development and quality of your joint programme? Can you give examples?

7. Have you received adequate support from your internal quality insurance department and your quality assurance agency?

8. How much effort did it take to participate in the project? Please give an estimate in staff days or FTE.

9. Would you deem any other elements helpful to prepare the self-evaluation report and/or to organise the site visit? Or do you have any other suggestions for improvement of the procedure?

JOQAR pilot - Evaluation form for Experts

Please insert your answers in the corresponding frames below

1. Is the framework appropriate for the assessment of the quality of joint programmes?

2. Are there any missing criteria or standards in the framework? Do we need to include additional elements to grasp the quality of joint programmes?

3. Was the assessment report template useful for the report writing?

4. Did the panel have sufficient knowledge and experience with regard to the assessment of the quality of the joint programme?

5. Was it problematic to assess facilities of the locations, which were not visited?

6. Are the differences between satisfactory, good and excellent quality of the joint programme clear?

7. Were the right people interviewed during the site visit? Are there any changes you would like to recommend regarding the site visit?

8. Did all members of the panel share the same understanding of definitions?
Would you find it useful to have a training session on how to deal with the procedure?

9. Do you have any suggestions for other improvements of the procedure?

JOQAR pilot - Evaluation form for Agencies

Please insert your answers in the corresponding frames below

1. Is the framework appropriate?

2. Would more elaborate guidelines for writing the self-evaluation reports be needed in the future?

3. Was the institution well prepared for the procedure?

4. Did the panel function well?

5. Were the assessments rules clear and used well by the panel?

6. Were the right people interviewed during the site visit and do you have any recommendations for the site visit?

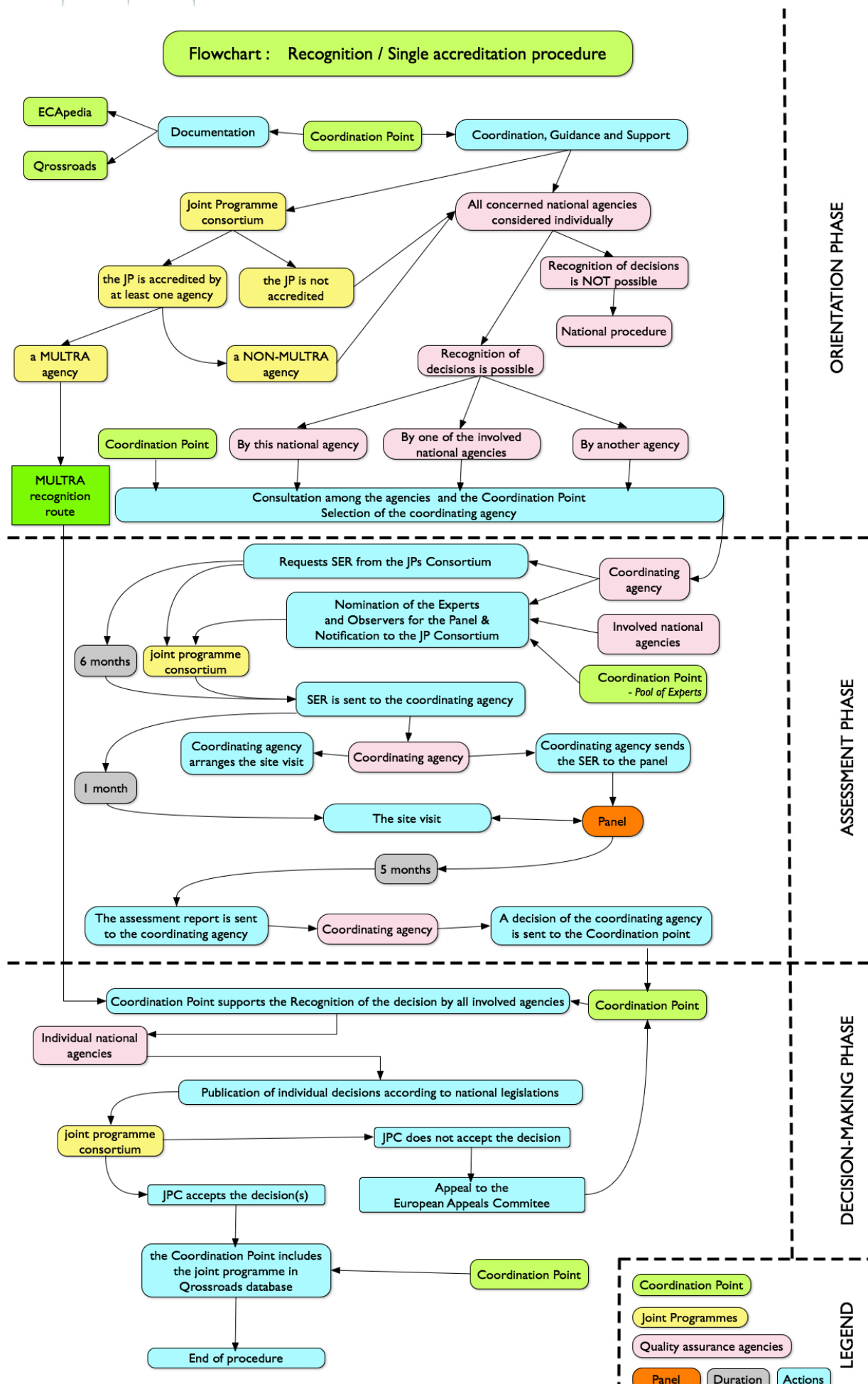
7. Did you experience any difficulties with the final decision-making by your agency (e.g. whilst dealing with assessment results of divergent national components)?

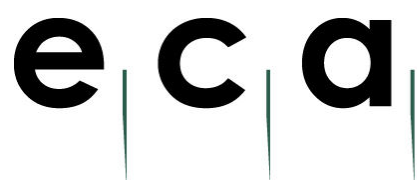
8. Did you find the communication with the coordination point efficient? Are there any elements to improve?

9. Do you have suggestions for the improvement of the single accreditation procedure?

Annex 3: Revised workflow chart

[See next page]





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