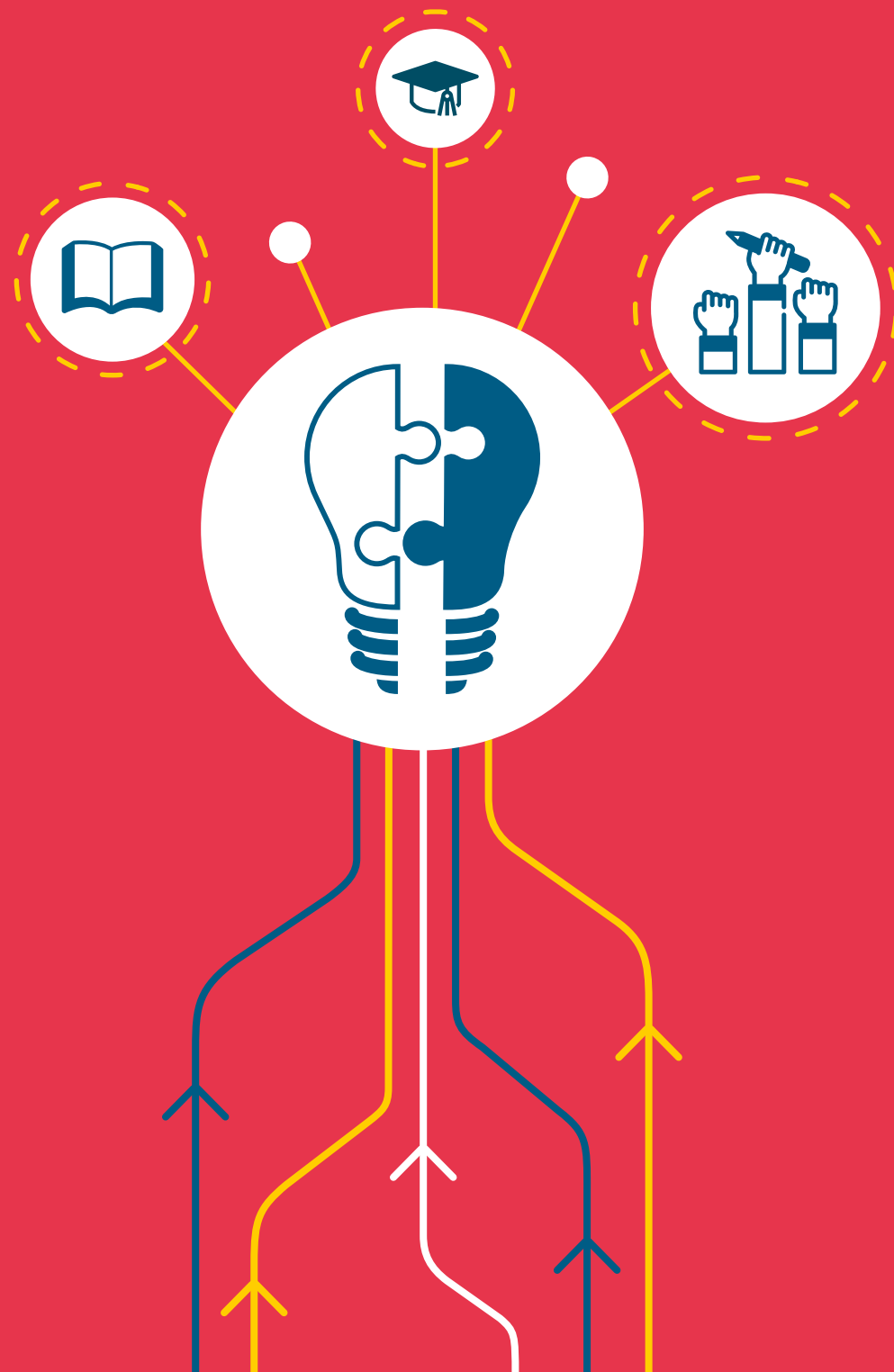# *Pathways to* PRACTICE

A PRACTITIONER'S TOOLKIT

DESIGNING AND DELIVERING
SUSTAINABLE JOINT MASTER'S PROGRAMMES

By Andries Verspeeten and Mirko Varano

EAIE
European Association for
International Education

ABOUT THE EAIE

Founded in 1989, the European Association for International Education (EAIE) is the European centre for knowledge, expertise and networking in the internationalisation of higher education. As a member-led association of more than 3000 members from over 95 countries, our mission is to help our members succeed professionally and to contribute to developments in international higher education from a European perspective.

We achieve this mission through a combination of training, conferences, and knowledge acquisition and sharing. We partner with key stakeholder organisations and institutions to promote our membership's interests and advance international higher education in Europe and the rest of the world.

www.eaie.org

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TOPIC IN CONTEXT

Most European higher education institutions offer joint programmes these days, albeit with varying degrees of effectiveness. Recognised as a useful tool to enhance student learning and boost international visibility and attractiveness, joint programmes increasingly form a key aspect in the internationalisation strategies of many higher education institutions.

When it comes to supporting a university's internationalisation efforts, proponents of joint programmes cite their main benefits as being:

- allowing universities to expand their academic offerings at a lower cost than if they had to develop new specialisations on their own;
- helping raise visibility in new markets, where the partners are already well established, thereby increasing recruitment options.

The additional advantages of joint programmes include:

- an enhancement of internationalisation in general;
- an improvement in the academic quality of those programmes offered jointly with other institutions;
- spin-off joint research projects;

- benchmarking opportunities for administrative staff;
- enhanced and better structured teaching;
- staff mobility at programme level;
- capacity building and the proliferation of joint programmes in other faculties within the same institution.

For participating students, the benefits of joint programmes lie in having access to a more structured international experience than that offered by other study abroad models. Improved employability due to novel specialisations, access to new labour markets, and personal development opportunities, including the chance to learn new languages and forge an extended network of contacts, are also factors. Additionally, joint programmes come without the credit recognition challenges associated with some other models.

Despite their benefits, studies show that half the universities offering joint programmes have been forced to discontinue at least one programme on grounds of unsustainability. Among the main reasons cited for this is the difficulty in ensuring their durability and efficiency, with sustainability ranked as their most challenging aspect overall. When programmes are discontinued, there can be negative consequences. Not only is there a risk of wasted time and resources, but reputations can also be damaged if partners lose trust, or the alumni of the discontinued programme lose faith in their awarding institution(s).

Purposefully designing and delivering joint programmes with an eye to ensuring their viability over the long term offers tangible educational, financial, reputational and student outcomes and benefits.

WHAT
PROBLEM DOES IT SOLVE?

Building sustainability into the design and delivery of joint programmes can help institutions to avoid the following problems:

High costs: designing a new programme requires investment of time and resources. Ensuring that the programme is relevant and innovative can prevent time and money being wasted. A joint programme that's attractive to students will also reduce costs per capita, allowing participating institutions to keep tuition fees at a steady level or from running the programme at a loss.

Bureaucracy: if the allocation of responsibilities is clearly defined at all levels, the workload distributed evenly among the partners, and due diligence undertaken with regards to the regulatory framework and risk management procedures, then bureaucracy can be kept in check.

Reputational damage: successful joint programmes can be a real boost to a higher education institution's internationalisation and visibility, but a failure to properly deliver a joint programme can have a negative impact on its reputation.

WHO
SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

During the development of joint programmes, the following stakeholders should be engaged:
- programme directors
- international officers
- quality assurance staff
- financial managers
- institutional leaders

During the delivery, the following stakeholders play crucial roles:
- communication managers
- recruiters
- admission officers
- credential evaluators
- student unions/support services

WHAT
ARE YOU AIMING FOR?

A sustainable joint programme is characterised by academic, financial and organisational integrity. It features satisfied and engaged stakeholders, many meaningful outputs and credible prospects for success.

It will possess distinctive branding, balanced workload between partners, and be underpinned by a financial and strategic plan that has the support of stakeholders.

TERMINOLOGY

Joint programmes:
an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from EHEA countries, and leading to double/ multiple degrees or a joint degree

European Approach to Quality Assurance in Joint Programmes:
process developed in the Bologna framework by which the accreditation of a joint programme in one country/region is recognised in the other(s)

'Jointness' of a programme:
the degree of programme-level integration between the partner universities, including marketing, admissions, management, delivery and funding

Sustainability:
a set of measures that ensures the programme's overall relevance in the mid to long term

KEY STEPS
IN THE PROCESS

DESIGN PHASE

1. Conduct a needs analysis

2. Engage relevant academic staff

3. Engage suitable employers

4. Select partners

5. Allocate resources

6. Engage administrative staff

7. Develop the partnership agreement

8. Set up a steering committee

9. Assure quality

DELIVERY PHASE

1. Conduct targeted promotion and recruitment

2. Develop programme branding

3. Embed staff mobility

4. Conduct an impact analysis

DESIGN PHASE

1. CONDUCT NEEDS ANALYSIS
Conduct a detailed needs analysis (with academic and administrative staff, partners, students, employers *etc*) and compare it to the existing programme offering, distinguishing the added value of operating in a joint international context.

2. ENGAGE RELEVANT ACADEMIC STAFF
Consider how their strengths can be leveraged (*eg* specific scientific competence in the relevant field but also innovative pedagogical approaches, international experience, intercultural communication skills, international network *etc*), while taking challenges into account (*eg* if the programme is to be delivered in English, ensure the academics required to teach it are able to do so in a second language, so as not to undermine the overall quality).

3. ENGAGE EMPLOYERS
Work with employers throughout the programme's life cycle, to provide students with a higher degree of employability while incorporating additional funding opportunities that support the programme.

4. IDENTIFY PARTNERS
Seek out partners with a shared vision, a complementary educational offer and comparable student services. Partners where existing research cooperation and/or 'regular' student exchange arrangements exist should be considered first, rather than newcomers. Compatibility of partner institutions is one of the main elements needed to ensure sustainability.

5. ENSURE INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT
Ensure all partners have institutional support and adequate personnel and financial resources committed. Use the needs analysis to convince leadership of the added value of the programme (innovative programmes are more likely to get institutional support).

6. ENGAGE KEY ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF
Ensure a clear distinction between administrative and academic roles throughout the development process, with academics assigned responsibility for realising the academic concept and administrators given ownership of the legal and administrative elements (credit allocation, minimum requirements, thesis defence, language policy *etc*).

7. DEVELOP THE PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT
This will be your main legal tool throughout the delivery of the programme. The rationale of the programme should be made explicit in the agreement, as well as the needs analysis, partners' resource allocations, the rules for termination and conflict resolution, intellectual property rights regulations, course offering, teaching responsibilities, learning outcomes, tuition fee policies *etc*. The more complete the agreement, the easier it will be for the partners to ensure the sustainability of the programme in the long term.

8. **ASSIGN DECISION-MAKING POWER TO THE JOINT PRO-GRAMME STEERING COMMITTEE**
Allow it to act as programme board. A clear problem-solving procedure should be established that enables it to tackle complications. It is important to determine the competences of the steering committee in the consortium agreement and confer to its members the power to approve changes to the annexes without going through the formal institutional approval process.

9. **ASSURE QUALITY**
Consider quality assurance (QA), internal and external evaluation, and accreditation at the time of programme development. Make a QA plan and investigate the possibility for programme accreditation through the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

DELIVERY PHASE

1. **ENSURE TARGETED PROMOTION AND RECRUITMENT**
Highlight the academic content, support services and extra-curricular activities. Be clear on the nature of the programme (research versus professional Master's) and the added value it brings. Identify specific undergraduate summer schools where recruitment for the programme might prove effective.

2. **DEVELOP THE BRAND**
Identify and articulate aspects of the programme and its learning outcomes that are unique and innovative. Design a programme logo and produce branding tools (*eg* banners for student fairs and T-shirts) to enhance the feeling of belonging. Organise exclusive extracurricular events and develop a dedicated programme website.

3. **EMBED STAFF MOBILITY**
This can be a powerful tool to create a feeling among staff of belonging to a specific community, which might lead to spin-off activities among faculties and serve as a further incentive to continue the programme.

4. **CONDUCT A YEARLY IMPACT ANALYSIS**
Measure the programme's impact in terms of employability and relevance of learning outcomes. Pay particular attention to feedback from alumni.

ℹ️ *USEFUL TIPS*

- Remember every joint programme has its own requirements; the transferability of administrative solutions between programmes will be limited.
- Pay attention to geographical/national differences and special needs.
- Target the joint programme students as a specific group, rather than just as general exchange students.
- Ensure teaching staff are aware of the international character of the classroom and prepare them to teach in that context.
- Be aware of the need to structurally embed the programme, as key staff involved in a joint programme may leave. Documenting procedures, the nature of stakeholder responsibilities and the scope of specific roles are examples of structural embedding.

TAKE-AWAYS

- If joint programmes are to become less dependent on external funding schemes, their financial sustainability will have to be provided by a long-term financial commitment from partners or by external sponsors.

- Joint programmes may benefit from tuition fee policies around the world becoming more aligned, as similar fee levels will facilitate collaboration between higher education institutions, where previous discrepancies at times ruled out collaboration.

- The European Universities Initiative will lead to the development of a greater number of joint programmes within this context, and even to full-fledged 'European degrees', which may help to address some common sustainability issues.

- The implementation of a European approach to QA, leading to an easier accreditation process for joint programmes, is vital to their development and positive in the sense that it will save time and money.

FURTHER READING

👆 Joint programmes from A to Z: A reference guide for practitioners:
Eacea.ec.europa.eu

👆 Joint and Double Degree Programs in the Global Context:
Ecahe.eu

👆 Joiman Project: Joiman.eu

👆 Redeem Project: Redeemproject.eu

👆 Tuning Glossary: Unideusto.org

👆 EACEA European Commission: Joint International Master
Programmes: Eacea.ec.europa.eu

👆 Joint Programmes Publication: Ecahe.eu

👆 European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes:
Eqar.eu

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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