

# **HERE Study Visit Report**

**“Joint degrees: strategic and  
operational implementation –  
one size does not fit all”**

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**University of Coimbra, Portugal**

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The topic

Internationalisation and joint degrees have been key items on the European agenda for the modernisation of higher education, as well as in the Bologna Process, for over a decade. The 2015 and 2018 ministerial communiqués regarded joint degrees as one of the building blocks of the European Higher Education Area and called for “integrated transnational cooperation in higher education, research and innovation”. In December 2017, the European Council urged EU Member States and the European Commission to take forward a number of initiatives, including the building of “bottom-up networks of universities across the EU which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities”. In the newly published call for the Erasmus+ programme for 2019<sup>1</sup>, ‘European Universities’ are highlighted as a new feature, which the European Commission will co-finance. This has given added momentum to the design of joint and double degrees in programmes such as Erasmus Mundus, in the context of integrated institutional partnerships.

Joint degrees foster excellence, innovation, graduate employability and the ability to operate in a globalised world. They are one of the most complex forms of internationalisation, requiring highly coordinated academic and operational interaction between different higher education institutions and their support services.

The University of Coimbra (UC) has kept pace with these developments. Joint degrees were explicitly included in its Strategic Plans for 2011-2015 and 2015-2019. During the HERE study visit organised on this topic and summarised in this report, participants gained an overview of its strategic planning process and learned how joint degrees have contributed to the fulfilment of its strategic mission, notably with regard to development cooperation and the provision of an attractive portfolio of international programmes. They were able to appreciate how UC maintains quality standards for the full life cycle of the joint programmes, without sacrificing the flexibility required to develop solutions in the context of very different academic cultures and institutional contexts. Participants also learned about UC’s different joint degree models, their financial and legal implications, as well as the need to comply with specific requirements and formal procedures.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-programme-guide-2019\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/erasmus-programme-guide-2019_en)

The study visit was a follow-up to a HERE seminar held in Novi Sad (Serbia)<sup>2</sup> in 2016 on joint degree development. In the intervening period, interest in joint programmes has continued to grow, as evidenced by the requests for SPHERE Technical Assistance Missions (TAM). Moreover, a number of national legislations have come to accommodate joint programmes, while in the Bologna Process significant efforts have been made to facilitate their quality assurance and accreditation<sup>3</sup>.

## 1.2 Learning Outcomes

- To understand the overarching strategic planning of the University of Coimbra and the role played by the internationalisation of education and research in the accomplishment of its vision and missions;
- To learn – via the example of UC – how to ensure the success of joint degrees through robust and supportive management and administration, including quality assurance;
- To be aware of the importance of course coordination and support services in the implementation of joint degrees;
- To learn about different joint degree models at UC.

## 1.3 Attendance

With the exception of the three members of the SPHERE team and the representative of the Executive Agency for Education, Audiovisual and Culture, all 33 participants were HERE. They came from 19 countries. The colleagues from UC were all as listed in the programme<sup>4</sup>, apart from Professor Paulo Sousa who was indisposed; he was replaced by Professora Joana Alves. (For the full list of participants, see the Annex).

## 2. Preparation for the seminar

In order to shape the event in accordance with participants' needs, the SPHERE team undertook a pre-survey designed to sound out their experience and expectations. It secured a good response rate of 68%. In addition, five informative case studies were received from Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Palestine and Ukraine<sup>5</sup>, two of which (Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, both

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<sup>2</sup> <https://supporthere.org/novisad2016>

<sup>3</sup> <https://enga.eu/index.php/european-approach-for-quality-assurance-of-joint-programmes/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://supporthere.org/coimbra2018/page/programme-18>

<sup>5</sup> These are posted at <https://supporthere.org/coimbra2018/page/documents-presentations-4>

countries with relatively high numbers of joint programmes) were subsequently the object of presentations by HERE during the study visit. The relatively high response rate illustrates the usefulness of the pre-survey. It revealed the contours of the context, while stimulating discussion by inviting participants to reflect on the position of their own institutions.

## 2.1 Summary of pre-survey results

The pre-survey first sought to clarify relevant definitions of joint programmes and to discover how widely they were shared. With only a few exceptions, there was broad acceptance of the terms ‘joint programme’ and ‘joint degree’, as defined by the *Joint Programmes from A to Z* reference guide (otherwise known as JDAZ)<sup>6</sup>. Some participants (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova) cited the definitions enshrined in their national legislations. The pre-survey also revealed that there is already a substantial number of joint programmes up and running in the HERE countries: 21 responses indicated provision at Master level, 17 at Bachelor level, and 13 at doctoral level.

When asked what motivated this commitment of resources, respondents principally cited the wish to develop high quality study programmes (27), the drive to internationalise and to secure strategic partnerships (26), and the employability imperative (20). It was also pointed out that international joint programmes can, in certain circumstances, mitigate against brain drain by ensuring that at least part of the programme is studied in a ‘home’ university; in the same way, they have an access dimension inasmuch as they give less well funded students a viable alternative to full-time study abroad.

The Erasmus Mundus programme emerged as the leading source of funding (16 responses), followed by institutional commitments (10) and uprated tuition fees (8). Around half of the respondents reported the existence of local, regional and national support – some of it financial (for recruitment), but mainly in the form of enabling legislation and administrative measures aimed at facilitating provision.

Very encouraging was the indication – by a large majority of respondents – that these motivations were enshrined in institutional internationalisation strategies. This creates a space for the outstanding challenges to be placed on institutional agendas. For there are, indeed, outstanding challenges. Cited by respondents were, in descending order of importance:

- Integrating the curricular content of joint programmes
- Providing effective support services to students
- Determining the optimal modes of quality assurance, enhancement and accreditation
- Deciding on the language(s) of course delivery

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<sup>6</sup> EP-Nuffic, The Hague, 2015, pp.11-12, available at [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/news/joint-programmes-a-z-a-reference-guide-for-practitioners\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/news/joint-programmes-a-z-a-reference-guide-for-practitioners_en)

- Sustaining programmes following the termination of external funding
- Recruiting students and setting fee levels

### 3. Highlights from the sessions

#### 3.1 The institutional strategic framework

The scene was set by Professor Joachim Carvalho, UC's vice-rector for internationalisation and, as such, responsible for determining, monitoring, evaluating and evolving the University's strategic focus. He identified the three powerful factors shaping its strategy:

- Demographic: Portugal's declining birth-rate and high level of emigration;
- Geographical: UC's location at a point at which, historically, Arabic and European cultures have met and interacted;
- Historical: UC's growth and consolidation throughout the period of Portuguese maritime exploration and the pioneering of globalisation.

It is not enough to state the importance of institutional strategy; what is crucial is that the strategy has a *coherent specificity* deriving from the institution's context. In UC, it is not a question of whether internationalisation can be sustainable; it is rather that the University itself is sustainable only if it is international. Hence **the key role played by joint programmes which raise UC's international profile, reinforce strategic partnerships and enhance the capacity of its administrative systems to accommodate activities beyond its domestic horizon.**

Participants subsequently heard presentations<sup>7</sup> by four course coordinators:

- The Brazilian undergraduate international programme (PLI)<sup>8</sup>
- The integrated programme Bordeaux-Coimbra<sup>9</sup> in political science
- The Erasmus Mundus Joint Master in Work, Organisational and Personnel Psychology (WOP-P)<sup>10</sup>
- The International Master in Applied Ecology (IMAE)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> All the presentations are available at <https://supporthere.org/coimbra2018/page/documents-presentations-4>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.uc.pt/en/academicos/percurso/pli>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sciencespobordeaux.fr/fr/formation/diplome-d-institut-d-etudes-politiques-UX/doubles-diplomes-internationaux-cycle4/filiere-integree-france-portugal-coimbra-fifpo-program-filiere-integree-france-portugal-coimbra-fifpo.html?search-keywords=Coimbra> (web page in French)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.erasmuswop.org/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.emmc-imaec.org/>

These exemplified the importance of the strategic framework and the scope it offers for creative curriculum design. The lesson was clear: joint programmes are most likely to benefit from energetic institutional support if they chime with institutional strategy and if **the strategy itself is coherent, focused, and specific to context**.

### 3.2 Quality assurance

Participants heard a presentation of the Portuguese national quality assurance apparatus, operating at programme and institutional levels, within which UC deploys – in tandem – ISO 9000 and ESG<sup>12</sup>. These are the building blocks of a quality management system based on risk management, supporting the decision-making process by aligning mission and resources.

The quality assurance of UC's joint programme portfolio is based on a PDCA cycle involving all internal stakeholders and working to a strict rhythm. Students are fully participant, both in online evaluations and in membership of relevant committees at departmental, faculty and university levels. The emphasis is strongly on enhancement and has achieved significant results, notably in improvements to the implementation of student-centred learning, timetabling, and the physical environment.

Particularly useful was the tabulation of quality assurance responsibilities in the WOP-P joint programme. It set out the **periodicity, agents and methods of course monitoring**, thereby demonstrating the capacity of the programme to respond to the observations and recommendations of its external evaluators.

The operating environments of joint programmes are complex and much more prone to change than those of purely domestic courses. The lesson to be drawn here is that their **quality assurance procedures must be comprehensive, involving all stakeholders, backed by national and international good practice, and oriented towards enhancement**. Moreover, because the pressures of sustainability are heavier, measures have to be agreed at consortium level and in many instances swiftly implemented.

### 3.3 Administrative support

It rapidly became clear that the administration of joint programmes is complicated and burdensome, in the sense that extra time and capacity has to be found for publicity, admissions and enrolments, recognition of prior qualifications, drafting of course regulations, processing of

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<sup>12</sup> European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015, <https://enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/>

tuition fees, maintenance of student assessment records (including assessment of work placements), issuance of diplomas, and so on. All of which must necessarily be managed with a single or multiple institutional partners, perhaps across language barriers, working to different national procedures. In most instances, management information software is not integrated across the consortium, which means that data cannot be constantly transferred in real time. In the view of UC, **there must therefore be comprehensive data exchange at least twice in each academic year**. Crucial, too, is the involvement of academic staff and students; administrative support can be provided effectively only if the course teams fully understand both the procedures and the constraints.

All of this presents a challenge to all the partner institutions, and particularly to the coordinating institution. Precisely because of the complexity of the operating environment and its susceptibility to change, it is important that the role of the administrative support services goes beyond reacting to urgent requests from course teams. **Administrative staff must also be fully participant, at consortium level, in the planning, monitoring and review processes of the joint programme.**

One presenter pointed to the frequent incidence of ‘bureaucratic improvisation’ – an apparent contradiction in terms, but one which underlines the paramount need for **mutual trust**. Not only trust between partner institutions, but also **between administrative service providers and senior managers**, since the former must be allowed sufficient amount of discretion to deal speedily with the inevitably unforeseen problems.

### 3.4 The issue of sustainability

One of the key characteristics of successful joint programmes is that they can never be sure that they will continue to function. Typically, there is a shift of dependence from external funding to funding generated by the consortium. All programmes launched with Erasmus Mundus support are bound to confront this reality. It is a difficult moment, but one that is more easily addressed if it has been borne in mind from the very beginning of the collaboration.

Four points emerged from the presentations and discussions:

- Joint programmes are best protected if they are – as indicated earlier in this report – fully aligned with institutional strategy. If they are not, then they risk lower internal visibility and cannot be assured that the full panoply of institutional support systems will work to their advantage.
- Joint programmes that originate in collaborative research activities are in general well placed; they can be carried along by long-term research considerations and can often tap into research funding streams.

- Deeper integration can also be a source of security, particularly if it involves economies of administrative time and effort and/or opening up course modules to students on domestically funded programmes, making them polyvalent.
- Ultimately, and in most cases, sustainability comes down to the quest for alternative funding streams once the initial external funding has been exhausted. Buoyant programmes must think, at the earliest possible stage, how to attract alternative finance, scholarships and sponsorships, as well as how to secure viability by recruiting self-funded students. UC experience confirms that this thinking is greatly facilitated when alumni associations are actively involved.

### 3.5 Guidelines and tools for developing joint programmes

Finally, participants heard a presentation on the **UC Guide to the internationalisation of study programmes**; they also received in hard copy the template used by UC to seal inter-institutional cooperation agreements. Speakers from the floor confirmed the applicability of the guidelines:

- They should be drafted by the relevant internal stakeholders: international, quality assurance, and management information offices.
- They should draw on recognised international good practice.
- They should effectively target academic staff, providing clear practical information on all aspects of international course design, as well as on the navigation of internal and external course approval procedures.
- They should focus on the need to undertake – as critical adjuncts to the process of curriculum design – analysis of need, calculation of added value, rationale of partner choice, audit of potential legislative and logistic difficulties, risk assessment, funding sources, and drafting of agreement.

## 4. Conclusions

### 4.1 Main messages of the study visit

- An institution intending to develop joint programmes must have a clear idea of its context and mission, together with a coherent and viable implementation strategy.
- It must also have strong leadership, capable of ensuring that the joint programmes are well integrated into the institutional course portfolio.
- Its support services – notably the International Relations Office, the Administrative and Quality Assurance Offices – must be proactive and fully participant in the design and delivery of joint programmes.

- It must ensure that, at the level of the consortium, there is scope for preparatory meetings involving all stakeholders, including students with relevant academic and quality assurance experience.
- Without robust teamwork within the consortium, it is impossible to guarantee effective planning of the progress from concept to delivery and to develop viable approaches to the subsequent evolution and sustainability of the joint programme.
- These measures can help ensure that there is mutual trust between institutional partners; where academic cultures and procedures differ, trust is paramount.
- There is evidence to suggest that successful joint programmes are most likely to emerge from existing research collaborations.
- Course design will depend significantly on the volume of external funding; planners should actively anticipate how to assure sustainability – in the framework of their institutional strategies – once this funding is reduced or exhausted.
- From the bottom-up perspective, proposals for joint programmes may vary widely in conception. At the same time, institutional support services tend to function better where there is uniformity. Hence the need for a versatile institutional template which strikes an appropriate balance between administrative and procedural efficiency, on the one hand, and specific disciplinary requirements, on the other. Different models have to be accommodated – but they have to be ‘accommodatable’!
- Joint programmes vary in their degree of integration. Course planners should consider whether, in their particular institutional contexts, it is better to aim for full integration at the outset or to approach it in a series of steps.

#### 4.2 For web forum debate and/or for further investigation in SPHERE seminars and TAMs

HERE shared the following ideas for topics that could be further explored both nationally and in the context of SPHERE activities:

- A systematic survey of the funding models used by joint programmes, including a focus on the marketing involved in assuring sustainability.
- A closer look at joint curriculum development – for example, the process of negotiating agreed learning outcomes between partners – and at examples of the innovative pedagogy to which this might lead.
- Tighter specification of criteria and indicators used in accreditation and quality assurance.
- Analysis of employability and brain drain in the context of national and regional labour markets, as well as of the role of joint programmes.
- Discussion of how best to launch, build and consolidate joint programmes, i.e. should they evolve in scope from domestic to cross-border, from European to international, from double diploma to joint award, etc.?

- Longer and more focused discussions with students who have participated in joint programmes and sharing/pooling information on alumni surveys and graduate tracking to generate greater evidence on how students utilise their joint programme experience.
- An up-to-date map of national legislations regarding joint programme provision.
- Problems of recognition and the development of a global recognition convention.

On behalf of all the participants, SPHERE wishes to express its gratitude to the University of Coimbra for its warm welcome and willingness to share its experience. In particular, we thank Dra Filomena Marques de Carvalho, head of the International Relations Office, and all her team for organising a very productive study visit.